

Social Change/Self-Help/Psychology

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INSIGHT & ACTION

TOVA GREEN & PETER WOODROW

INSIGHT AND ACTION



HOW TO DISCOVER AND SUPPORT A LIFE
OF INTEGRITY AND COMMITMENT TO CHANGE

BY TOVA GREEN AND PETER WOODROW

WITH FRAN PEAVEY

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FOREWORD: FACTS ABOUT GEESE *

Milton Olsen (the Naturalist) said it's very interesting that, particularly with geese, we have a lot to learn about collectives.

Fact One: As each bird flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the birds following it. By flying in a V-formation, the whole flock adds 71 percent greater flying range than if the bird flew alone. Many indigenous cultures recognize that there's a lot I can do by myself, there's a lot I can do with a partner, but the power of what I can get done with a collective is quantum. It's a mega-step, it's a mega movement. The lesson from this fact: people who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they're going quicker and easier because they're traveling on the thrust of one another. That's a universal collective lesson.

Fact Number Two About Geese: Whenever a goose falls out of formation it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to fly alone and quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird immediately in front. Lesson: If we have as much sense as a goose, we will stay in formation with those who are headed where we want to go and be willing to accept their help, as well as give ours to others.

Fact Number Three: When the lead goose gets tired, it rotates back into the formation and another goose flies at the point position. An invaluable lesson for us to apply to all group work. It pays to take turns doing the hard tasks and sharing leadership. With people as with geese, we are interdependent on each others' skills and capabilities and unique arrangements of gifts, talents, resources, or what indigenous societies call the "good, true, and beautiful."

*From a talk by Angeles Arrien to the Organization Development Network, 1992.

Fact Number Four: The geese in formation honk from behind to encourage those in front to keep up their speed. Lesson: we need to make sure our honking from behind is encouraging. And not something else. In groups where there is greater encouragement against great odds, the production is much greater—the power of encouragement. Now, I love the word courage because it means “to stand by one’s heart, to stand by one’s core.” To encourage someone else’s core, to encourage someone else’s heart—that quality of honking.

Fact Number Five: When a goose gets sick, or wounded, or shot down, two geese drop out of formation and follow it down to help and protect it. They stay with it until it is able to fly again or dies. Then they launch out on their own with another formation or catch up with the flock. Lesson: if we have as much sense as geese, we too will stand by each other in difficult times as well as when we are strong. And I think it’s important that one of the things indigenous cultures have done for years is that they look to nature as an outer mirror of one’s own internal nature. And so as we begin to learn about collectives of animals and their patterns, perhaps we have some tools, techniques, methodologies about community and about collective work and group work.

INTRODUCTION

You are not alone. You don’t have to make the most important decisions in your life by yourself. Together, we have resources around us to sustain us in our difficult work to make the world more just, safe, and sustainable for all.

“I feel drawn towards work against violence in the schools. It’s going to be emotionally demanding and physically threatening work. Will you support me as I get into this? Are there ways I can support you in your work?”

“I think my path is taking me towards using my artistic talents to stimulate new ways of thinking about the relationships between women and men. This would be a major career change for me. Would you help me think through this decision?”

“I want to develop new ways to run socially-responsible businesses that don’t exploit people or the environment. Can you help me keep on track with this work?”

The authors have given this book the title *Insight and Action*. We gain *insight* as we search within ourselves for greater self-understanding, for the seeds of growth and change, for inklings about the right path for us. We take *action* as we set out upon that path, absorbing the experiences we find there, noticing how they change us, gathering new insights about ourselves and the world around us.

Work for change is a constantly evolving process. When we act, we can learn. If we pay attention, action generates insights, from which flow ideas for more accurate and effective action. Action can also lead to periods when we need to reflect, to rededicate, or to redirect our energies. In order to sustain our work for a better world, to make it increasingly effective, we need support, compassionate critique, and challenging perspectives.

Insight and Action is about how we can sustain our commitments to creating the kind of world in which we want to live. All of us involved in such

SUPPORT GROUP BLESSING

May the life of your support group be a full circle.
May it be nourishing.
May its roots deepen and its leaves be green, its fruit plentiful.
May it experience all the seasons of the year
and die with dignity when it is time.



"The Gang." Photographed by Bev Ramsay

Section II

CLEARNESS FOR INDIVIDUAL DECISION MAKING

by Peter Woodrow

INTRODUCTION TO CLEARNESS

A Personal Story about Clearness

Late last spring I was feeling dissatisfied with my work. I had been providing organizational development consulting services to nonprofit groups and also doing occasional training in conflict resolution. It didn't seem to hang together for me and I was getting very tired of working alone most of the time, since nonprofit groups can rarely afford to hire a team. Meanwhile, I had applied for a job as director of a major institute within an academic institution, but found myself feeling profound ambivalence about that kind of institutional position. At about the same time, a large social change organization I had been associated with for many years was undergoing reorganization and several new high-level positions were being created. The executive director asked me if I was interested in applying for any of these new positions.

After stewing for some time, I decided that I should follow my own advice and call a clearness committee for myself. Within a few weeks I found a time when the members of a small clearness group could get together. The group was three people plus me: an old political ally, friend and current housemate; another old friend who had also been in a support group with me for several years; and another friend who knows me through Quaker circles and through sharing music. In preparation for the meeting, I wrote up a four page description of the various directions I was considering, including a quick analysis of the positives and negatives I felt about each choice, and a list of my various commitments. I distributed the paper to the group members before the meeting.

The process for this meeting was fairly informal. I asked that we start with silent worship and then said a few things to add to what I had already shared in the paper. I surprised myself and members of the group by expressing a need to understand and act on my "ministry" in the world, which for me had a spiritual dimension and a dimension based on where I feel excitement and energy—what we called my "heart work." I have felt drawn for many years toward conflict resolution work in the international arena; this is my heart

work. As a Quaker, there has always been an implicit spiritual dimension to much of what I do, but I talked about the need to make spirituality more explicitly present in my life and work. To my surprise, as I finished my remarks about this, a couple of people in the group were in tears—here was a level of caring, pain, and joy I had not expected.

The group began to respond to the information I had given out and the things I had said. They urged me to find a way to pursue my heart work, even though it might be difficult to find a paid position in that arena. At times individuals in the group started to get into quick exchanges and debate. When this happened, we called the group back to a mode of listening with a more spiritual tone. The doubts I was feeling about taking more institutional jobs were examined and the group confirmed that those positions would cut me off from the contributions I really want to make. The group also encouraged me to look for ways to build a local diverse team of conflict resolution and organizational development folks to work with in the long term.

I left the meeting feeling rededicated to work I care about deeply, supported in my tentative choice of direction, and challenged to give regular attention to my spiritual life and growth. I also felt buoyed up by the caring and thoughtful attention of members of my community.

What Is Clearness?

In simple terms, clearness brings a small group of four to eight people together to help one person, whom we will call the "focus person," clarify a present reality or determine a future direction in regard to career, relationships, family, social change work, religious calling and so on.*

Why is a clearness process necessary or important? There was a time when many people lived, worked, worshiped, married, birthed, played, and struggled with and among one group of people—their community. Those communities knew their boundaries, knew who was in and who was out, and knew what kinds of behavior were acceptable and what were not. Individuals were engaged at every level; they knew their place and function in society. When they were confused, there were many sources of guidance, both from rules and norms and from individuals in the community (ministers, priests, elders, relatives). Such a life had wonderful aspects, providing a caring, nurturing, and supportive environment. It also felt constraining and rigid to some.

Much has been written about alienation and isolation in modern industrialized society. Many aspects of life which were once integrated into multi-dimensional communities have become compartmentalized and private.

*The clearness process was originally developed by Quakers, and it has been adapted for use by social change activists and other religious communities. (See the article, "A Brief History of Clearness among Quakers and Others," in Appendix II.)

Today it is possible for an individual to go to school and college, marry, raise children, work at a job for many years, retire and expire, all without significant interaction with a community that either cares or constrains. While few live such purely alienated lives, many people feel an element of that disconnection. Many seek re-engagement with a caring community, where they can find both support and accountability for their lives and actions.

Clearness stands at the intersection of individuals and their communities; it is a way to directly involve the community in important decisions by individuals. Clearness acknowledges, in part, that the decisions of individuals have an effect on the broader group—and *vice versa*. For faith communities clearness is a practical reflection of the idea that “we are all part of one another.” Clearness provides a way that the personal process of spiritual discernment can be nurtured by the religious community. For social action groups, clearness reminds us that each of us is engaged in a long-term struggle towards inspiring visions and against powerful forces—which we can’t do alone. Clearness helps maintain the integrity of our own witness as we face larger social forces and the demands of those dearest to us.

Clearness does not imply “clearance.” The clearness group aids the focus person in seeking clarity, not permission or approval. In other words, the group engages in a process of mutual searching for the right way forward. The sense of “rightness” about a proposed action is often experienced as a new clarity, based on insights discovered during the clearness meeting. Even though this is a group endeavor, which benefits from the special chemistry of group interaction, the decision ultimately remains with the individual who brought the dilemma or problem to the group.

Clearness meetings do contain an element of judgment; the members of the group are not asked to blindly approve and support a proposed new direction or action by the focus person. Rather, the group listens closely, pools its wisdom and insights, and may, in some cases, challenge strongly. Dearly held assumptions may be tested and fail. Self-imposed expectations or expectations laid on the focus person by others may prove groundless. Creativity may emerge from unexpected places.

Clearness, at its best, is an expression of connection between individuals and their communities. It expresses the idea that we seek clarity together, collectively and individually. We are not alone in our efforts to be our truest selves and to discover our deepest integrity.

When to Use Clearness

Social change activists, religious groups, and cooperative communities have used clearness processes for a variety of purposes. Individuals who are at important choice points in their careers or personal lives have used it: in deciding to stay or move away, to pursue additional schooling or keep working, to change careers or revitalize the present one, to commit to a social justice

campaign or concentrate on earning money, to leave a relationship or move towards stronger commitment, to have a child or not.

The impetus for this kind of personal search can arise from several quarters. Perhaps it is dissatisfaction with a job or feeling underappreciated in it. Maybe there is an old dream that has not been fulfilled. Political events may also present a new challenge. Some people will be presented with an alluring opportunity. Others will embark on a deliberate period of search for the right way forward. The natural changes and rhythms of our lives bring us to new perspectives and new challenges.

There can be times in our lives when an utterly logical course, which was previously satisfying, suddenly seems barren or false—or it may just close down, forcing us into painful re-examination of the way we are to go. We may be seized by a sudden conviction that it is time to break with our past and begin some particular new venture. Sometimes we are going along contentedly enough when a new possibility that requires serious consideration is presented to us. Those who know us may begin to name a new thing in us that needs to be honored. Or we may wake one morning to find that a slow process of which we’ve been only marginally aware has crystallized, with a host of implications.*

In religious communities, the occasion for clearness may arise in a different way, when an individual in the group perceives, usually through worship, meditation or prayer, a new “call” or, as Quakers call it, a “leading.” In this case, clearness is a way for the group to explore the leading with the person who feels it, test it, and consider its implications for the community and for the individual. (Additional Quaker resources on clearness and spiritual discernment are provided in Appendix II. Others are listed in the bibliography).

Clearness is neither for everyone nor for all situations. This process is certainly not appropriate for someone in need of professional counseling. It is meant for people who are essentially whole and emotionally healthy, although they may be going through a period of personal crisis. Clearness is also not meant for every decision. Routine matters do not require this kind of careful and time consuming process.

Some situations may also require other responses by a caring community. For instance, if an individual or a family is going through a period of crisis or needs to be sustained by others, the community may wish to respond by creating some kind of ongoing support mechanism, rather than a clearness committee. (Note this is different from the support groups described elsewhere in this book, in that this is one-way care for an individual or family,

*Loring, Patricia. *Spiritual Discernment: The Context and Goal of Clearness Committees*. Pendle Hill Pamphlet 305, p.12.

not mutual support by all members of a small group.) The decision aspects of the situation may be appropriate for clearness at some stage in the process.

We have heard of clearness being used for an amazing array of decisions. Some examples include:

A teenager was trying to figure out whether to complete high school. A clearness committee helped him evaluate his options and identify additional information he needed.

A couple was struggling about whether to send their children to public or private schools and asked for a clearness group to meet with them.

A single woman sought support in determining whether or not to have a child without a partner.

A lesbian couple asked members of their community to help them decide whether to have a ceremony of commitment, similar to Quakers' use of the process for all marriages.

A woman used clearness to explore how to follow a calling to travel to Russia as a spiritual support to people there.

Couples have used clearness processes to help make decisions in the process of separation and divorce.

An older Quaker man asked for guidance from his meeting about his vocal ministry, concerned about its source and authenticity.

A couple was advised by a family therapist to place their son in a children's institution in order to deal with severe behavioral problems. A clearness group helped them make the difficult decision to go ahead—with positive results.

A social scientist was moved to write and publish a book-length challenge to a development organization about their methods. He asked a clearness group to discuss his ideas, read the manuscript, and keep his intentions positive.

A couple used a clearness process to decide whether to leave any of their inherited wealth to their children or to give all of their assets to social change groups before they died.

A young man finished his training in an ecological field, but came very close to deciding to become a minister. In the midst of his confusion about his future direction, a clearness group from his faith community helped him decide to commit himself to environmental efforts and to see this work as his ministry.

Clearness is a flexible tool which can be applied to many important life decisions, bringing members of our communities to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with us as we face challenges and opportunities.

FORMATS AND STYLES FOR CLEARNESS MEETINGS: THREE CASES

As a basic concept, clearness is quite simple; there is no need to codify a fixed set of rules for accomplishing it. On the other hand, we can draw on the wealth of experience with this flexible process to inform future uses and adaptations of it.

The three examples of clearness meetings which follow illustrate some of the many possible variations on the clearness process. Focus persons and facilitators are invited to read through these to get a sense of the range and to stimulate their thinking about what they want in their own clearness sessions.

Each example is accompanied by the agenda that was used for the meeting. Although these examples are based on real experiences, each is partly fictionalized or a composite of several actual cases.

Case One Brendan Faces the Music

Brendan had been totally immersed in Central America organizing work for several years, networking among the many groups, running training programs and study groups for activists, engaging in successive action campaigns, and attending a seemingly endless series of meetings. To earn money he had been working parttime as a waiter and, occasionally, as an extra carpenter for a contractor friend. On the side, when he had time, Brendan played music and wrote songs. He was often asked to sing or lead singing at rallies and group meetings; it was a part of the movement life that he loved.

In his third year of organizing, Brendan began to realize that he was feeling resentful of the work and dreading going to yet another meeting. He didn't feel so much exhausted as uninspired and without direction. He talked with a few friends about how he was feeling. He asked his friend Casey about

clearness, a process he had heard about but never tried. He knew that Casey had taken part in several clearness meetings and had held one recently for himself.

Brendan thought about who might be good members of the group. He asked Casey to facilitate and invited five others: Suzanna, who had worked on several campaigns with him; Greg, his contractor friend; Jill, an activist with whom he had had a peer counseling relationship for several years, although nowadays they mostly just sat around and talked; Janey, his oldest friend from high school days; and Everett, his "music buddy" with whom he would get together and jam when they both had time.

In preparation for the meeting, Brendan wrote up his thoughts about his possible future directions. He mentioned his ambivalence about Central America organizing—commitment mixed with guilt, since there was so much more to be done there. Among his options he listed 1) continuing with work and organizing as at present; 2) going to school to get a master's degree in political science and teaching so that he could teach high school social studies; 3) going to Central America on a development project (maybe using his carpentry skills); and 4) getting a full-time job for awhile and "just chilling out." At the end of his paper he wrote, "Of course, music will have to fit in there somewhere."

The clearness group got together for a potluck dinner (everyone brought something to share) at Casey's house. Afterwards, the group assembled in the living room and, with Brendan and Everett leading, sang a few songs. Members of the group then briefly shared what was happening in their lives—a quick "check-in." Casey reviewed the agenda and talked a bit about the purpose of the meeting. "Brendan is looking for feedback about his role in the movement and how he might develop a sense of a longer-term career." He also explained the role of the clearness group. He mentioned that Jill had agreed to take some notes for Brendan, noting mainly major points and suggestions.

Casey then asked members to state any biases they might feel up front. Suzanna said, half-jokingly, "I'll kill you if you desert the Central America movement. Seriously, I think you are a key person in this area and we will miss you terribly. But we need you whole and sane and I'll support whatever you decide." Greg and Everett both shrugged and said they didn't have a particular bias. Jill said, "I only want you to decide what you want in the long term and really go for it!" Janey remarked, "I don't care what you do, so long as it makes you happy—and it wouldn't hurt to leave room for a personal relationship!"

Casey asked Brendan if he wanted to add anything to the background paper he had already distributed. Brendan thought a minute and then talked about feeling not quite an adult. "Here I am thirty-four years old and I still don't have a steady job or a family. I have been working really hard, but it feels all scattered and unreal. I am committed to reducing the suffering of people in Central America, but I don't see how we are making a difference. The only time I feel whole is when I am singing."

The group then started asking questions. Had Brendan looked into graduate programs? What were his financial resources? Was there a way to continue with organizing work, but reduce the stress? How did he feel about teenagers and teaching? What would it be like to go from the experiential training model of the movement to teaching in a high school? What kinds of full-time jobs could he get? Someone suggested two development organizations active in Central America who might welcome his skills. After about forty-five minutes, Casey called a break.

After the break, Janey asked to speak. "Brendan, something has been bothering me ever since the beginning of the meeting when you said that the only time you feel whole is when you are singing. That just leapt out at me, but I didn't know where to go with it, since it didn't seem to figure in any of these options we have been considering. I'd like us to look at what music really means to you and how it fits with these other things. I know you used to have dreams about being a powerful movement musician. Where have they gone?" Everett, a man of few words, muttered, "Yeah, right."

The mood shifted in the room. Everyone waited expectantly for Brendan to respond. Greg, sitting next to him, could see that he was having trouble and put his arm around him. Finally, with tears in his eyes, Brendan looked up at Janey, smiled and said, "Hey, old friend, you nailed me." From there, the group worked with Brendan about how to bring music into the center of his life and to connect it to his passionate concerns for social justice. They discussed how he might earn a living (carpentry with Greg's crew as a day job, think about teaching eventually...) and how to continue a commitment to Central America work, but on a different basis.

Casey asked Brendan how he was doing with all this. "Well, to tell you the truth, I'm both excited and terrified at this point. But it's great—this could really happen and I'm ready to give it a try!" Casey summarized where they had come in the meeting to that point, including things members had agreed to do. Brendan had decided to take six months to move in the direction of making music his main movement work, including three months to extricate himself from various commitments, and three months to try working full-time as a carpenter while seeking opportunities to perform in public. The clearness group agreed to get together again in six months to see how it was all going. Jill gave Brendan the notes she had been taking and said, "You might want to look at these next week and see what has already changed inside you."

After a brief evaluation, Brendan decided they should end the meeting with a rousing chorus of "I Shall Be Released."

Agenda Outline:

Opening (singing, check-in, etc.)

Agenda Review: agenda, goal, role of the group, note taker

Check for Personal Biases

Comments/Background from the Focus Person

Questions/Discussion

Break

More Questions and Discussion

Summary of Conclusions, Next Steps, Collect Notes

Evaluation

Closing (song, circle, silence, refreshments...)

Case Two Cathy Almost Leaves

Cathy moved to San Francisco to serve as an intern with a large neighborhood youth program called Get Smart. The program works with inner city young people of all racial and ethnic groups, providing tutoring, alcohol and drug recovery groups, training in community organizing, and social analysis study groups. On occasion, Get Smart works in coalition with other organizations and service agencies on campaigns around specific issues in the community. Through these campaigns, the young people gain a lot of organizing experience.

Cathy's Asian American family had moved from Taiwan to a poor neighborhood of Boston when she was seven. They struggled financially while Cathy was growing up, but by the time she was in high school, her father had set up his own computer business. Even though it was still a sacrifice for her family, during her last two years of high school, Cathy attended a private school and won a scholarship to Wellesley. After finishing college with a degree in sociology, Cathy wanted to get some practical organizing and counseling experience before going to graduate school. The internship with Get Smart seemed just right.

Although Get Smart did not provide a formal training program for its interns, it encouraged all new staff to take part in all aspects of the program, including the organizer training program. In addition, all staff were required to be in a support group. The five interns and three newer staff members formed two such support groups, with occasional participation by one of the more experienced staff members.

After five months of the year-long internship, Cathy was miserable. She didn't feel as though she knew what she was doing. Her work assignments were vague. She felt alienated from other people in the program, frustrated with her support group, and angry over a lack of attention from her supervisor. Most of the youth involved with Get Smart were Latino, African American, and white. Only one other Asian American was involved in the organization—the bookkeeper—and Cathy had heard veiled references to the "model minority" from some of the youth and even from other staff. She had

been pleased with a young women's study group she started which had been researching the role of women in the community, including interviews with women in leadership positions in community organizations and politics. But that group fizzled out when a big campaign began around the school budget.

Cathy was seriously considering quitting and going back to Boston. At a moment of high frustration she blurted all of this out to Zima, the one other intern with whom she felt some friendship. Zima just listened and nodded and occasionally said, "Humph!" When Cathy finished her outburst, Zima asked, "Well, what do you want to do about it?" Cathy didn't know. Zima said, "From what you're saying, there are a bunch of tangled issues here, and you have got an important decision to make. I once was in a group to help someone think through issues like that—it was called a clearness committee. It worked somewhat like our support group, but we focused on one person and the decision they had to make. Would that work for you?" Cathy asked for time to think about it, but the next day she told Zima she was willing to try clearness.

Zima found the old photocopied handouts from the clearness meeting in which she had taken part. She and Cathy thought about who might be good to include in the clearness group and decided to make it all women. They chose one other woman from their support group, an African American woman named Jody; Elena, the Get Smart bookkeeper; Laura, a white working-class woman and one of the older organizers from Get Smart; Mrs. Chang, an older family friend who lived nearby; and Tina, Cathy's roommate. With Zima and Cathy it was a group of seven.

Zima helped Cathy put together a short paper describing her frustrations and listing the options she was considering: 1) trying to make the Get Smart internship work; 2) finding another job in San Francisco; and 3) moving back to Boston. This statement was sent out to the members of the clearness group in advance of the meeting.

The group met in a conference room at Get Smart on a Sunday morning when no one else was there. Zima asked the members of the group to start by introducing themselves and saying why they were there. Most indicated that they were there to help think with Cathy. Jody said, "Yeah, I want to assist Cathy, but when I read her statement, I realized that some of the rest of us have the same issues. I'm here for me too." Tina joked that she wanted a happy roommate: "I want to get rid of the ghost that's been hanging out in my apartment. This is an exorcism, isn't it?"

Zima explained the rest of the agenda and reminded the group that their role was to help Cathy in her decision process and that this was not a therapy group. She asked Tina to start taking notes, but to pass the paper to someone else after some time. She asked Cathy if she wanted to add anything to the statement she had already distributed to the group. Cathy did not have much to add, but said that she had talked with her parents who hoped she would

find a way to make it work in San Francisco, although they mostly wanted her back at home.

For a few minutes the women asked Cathy clarifying questions about her feelings and about the options she had listed. Zima then asked the group to brainstorm the things they saw as Cathy's strengths. She asked Cathy to name three things to start and then as people called out positive items, Zima wrote them up on large sheets of newsprint "so Cathy would have to look at them!" Among other things, the women listed: smart, dedicated, sensitive, energetic, good-looking—"no, let's face it, gorgeous," well organized, analytical.

Next, Zima instructed the group to think for a minute about their "wishes" for Cathy. After several minutes of silence while everyone thought, members of the group offered "wishes." Some of them were: "I wish Cathy felt totally at home at Get Smart." "I wish Cathy a project that is all hers." "I wish Cathy a gorgeous lover." (Laughter) "I wish Cathy to regain all of the excitement and energy she came with five months ago." "I wish Cathy to be the Queen of Asian American Youth Organizing!" "I wish Cathy a sense of connection and support every day." "I wish Cathy a challenging and realistic set of learning goals." "I wish Cathy strong roots in the Asian community." When they finished this round, the group gave a few little cheers and whoops. Someone remarked, "Wow! I guess we can quit right there!"

Smiling patiently, Zima called the group back to order and turned to Cathy. "OK, sister, what's your reaction so far? Would you like to explore one of the wishes? Where are you in this?" Cathy asked for time just to absorb the things the group had said so far. She sat and gazed at the newsprint for a few minutes and then said, "I see a theme running through several of the wishes—its about me reclaiming my Asian heritage and making that a part of my work. I guess I have been trying so hard to understand other people and their cultures, I have lost track of mine. And Get Smart is supposed to be about bringing people of all kinds together. From what Jody said at the beginning, I wonder how well supported other people feel—maybe it's not just me. Let's talk about how I might follow up on this, especially reaching back to my Asian roots and reaching out to other people more."

For a few minutes the group started probing Cathy's feelings of isolation and exploring her experiences as a new immigrant and latecomer in high school—wondering if those old feelings were affecting her ability to connect with people in the Get Smart context. Zima let this discussion go for awhile, but then noted that the point had been made and reminded the group that this was not therapy—Cathy would figure out how to deal with those issues.

After a quick break (Mrs. Chang's famous egg rolls and Laura's brownies), the group got back together and worked with Cathy on the issues of bringing Asian American youth into the Get Smart program, working on issues of stereotypes and misperceptions of the Asian community in staff and youth discussions, and building better support for learning among the interns. Mrs. Chang offered to introduce Cathy to her church, a major center in the Asian community. "Yeah, and a great source for that gorgeous lover," someone

joked. Elena said she had some connections in the Asian business community which might provide financial support for cross-cultural work between Asian young people and youth of other backgrounds. Jody suggested a meeting right away among all of the interns to raise the issues of better support, supervision, and learning systems. Laura said she was excited about the prospect of increasing Get Smart's outreach to the Asian community and offered to help Cathy develop a project plan.

Toward the end of the meeting, Zima asked Cathy if she felt clearer about her directions. Cathy said, "Well, sometimes I'm a little slow about these things. This is quite a shift in thinking. I think I want to let this sift for a few days, maybe even a week, and then I'll get back to each of you to let you know what I'm going to do. But I do feel renewed excitement—and this meeting itself has brought me closer to each of you. I can feel your caring and support which I had cut myself off from before. Thanks a lot!"

Jody passed Cathy the note pad which had been circulating around the room quietly. Zima asked the group to evaluate the meeting. People's positive comments: great facilitation; Cathy was brave; good group cooperation and thinking; exciting to see the shift in Cathy's thinking; fab food!; and "when can I have a clearness meeting?" On the to-be-improved side: we could have worked more with Cathy's strengths—they just sort of hung out there; this room was impersonal and institutional; could have used more time to talk through more issues; wanted to hear more about Cathy's long-term goals as a context for this meeting. To end the meeting, Zima "confessed" that she had always wanted to be a cheerleader and this was her chance. She had the group stand in a circle and do a chant for "Cathy's team."

Agenda Outline:

- Introductions (if needed) and Brief Sharing
- Agenda Review: role of group, purpose, agenda, note taker
- Sharing from Focus Person (additions to written statement)
- Questions of Clarification
- Brainstorm Strengths of Focus Person
- Group "Wishes" for the Focus Person
- Discussion: Focus Person Chooses a "Wish" or "Wishes" to Work with Further
- Break
- Continued Discussion
- Summary and Next Steps, Collect Notes
- Evaluation
- Closing (Song, cheers, hugs, more food...)

Case Three Anna Fights Burnout*

Anna, a Quaker woman, had been working for four years as the international coordinator of a nonviolent action group with membership dispersed around the world and demanding, crisis-prone projects in areas of hot conflict in Asia and Central America. It had been a grueling few years and Anna felt at the end of her physical, mental, and spiritual rope—yet for some reason she was reluctant to resign from the job and move on. Finally, after conversations with close friends, she decided to call a clearness meeting, something she had done at several points in her past and was quite familiar to her.

Anna gathered four people for the clearness meeting: Jim, her housemate; Judy, a co-worker; Karl, her activist lover; and Louisa, her spiritual partner, a woman with whom she often met for meditation and informal sharing. She asked Louisa to serve as clerk, or facilitator. Because the members of the group all knew Anna well and were fully informed about her dilemma, she felt that no written statement was necessary prior to the meeting.

The group gathered one February evening in a quiet cozy room with a wood stove at a local retreat center. Louisa began the meeting with a brief explanation of the steps of the process for this particular meeting. The group then settled into a period of silent worship. Out of that silence, Anna then shared a bit of the dilemma before her: her feelings of responsibility to the organization which she had worked so hard to build; her lack of clarity about her own next steps; her wish to have more time for a personal life; her strong commitment to work for peace; and her precarious financial situation. She mentioned that she was having trouble sorting out her desires for her own future from the demands of the organization's future.

For the next period, members of the group observed the discipline of only asking Anna questions. They held back their own opinions or advice and asked probing questions to help Anna clarify her own sense of direction. There was lots of silence between questions and Anna paused quietly to consider each question before answering. Jim asked what Anna really wanted in life. Judy probed for Anna's reasons for hanging on in the action organization, and where her sense of obligation came from. Karl remarked, "Anna, I have this picture of you swinging on a vine from one place to another, but afraid to let go of one vine to grasp the next. What does it feel like to consider leaving the action group? What are your worst fears?"

Louisa said, "Try just closing your eyes and imaging your future. What do you see?" Anna leaned back and closed her eyes. After a minute or so she smiled and said, "I have no idea what this means, but I get a picture of flying

*The format used for this clearness process is based on the process described by Jan Hoffman in her article in Appendix II.

on a winged creature of some kind." "OK, just give it more time. Sit with it another minute. What's your sense?" Louisa suggested. "I get this wonderful feeling of being carried and nurtured—real relief. I don't know where it's taking me, but it sure feels great!"

Anna was concerned about the timeline for the organization and when it might be convenient for her to leave. The next general assembly of the organization, planned for the coming September, had seemed a logical time for transition to a new coordinator, but the assembly had been postponed at least six months for financial reasons. Every time Anna contemplated continuing in the job for more than another year, she felt a huge knot well up in her stomach. She thought that she could hold out until September, but no longer.

Karl asked, "What is *your* timeline? Can you consider your needs as important as the organization's? It sounds to me as though you would like to leave by June. Why not?" Anna paused, her shoulders dropped. "Really? I could get out of this by June?! You know, I think that's what I really want, but I have not been letting myself consider that."

After further consideration, Anna said that she was clear that she should resign from the organization, effective in June. She was ready for this step, even though she was not sure where her own path would lead next, and it was not certain how the organization would find a replacement for her, given its fragile financial situation and the difficulty of finding someone willing to do an impossible job at low pay. The clearness group supported her in this "leap of faith" and helped her think about how she might discover her next "leading" (sense of direction arising from spiritual guidance).

Towards the end of the meeting, Louisa asked Anna how she wanted to use the rest of the time. Anna chose a period of open reflections (instead of more questions) to be followed by an imaging process. In the open reflection time which followed, members discussed how Anna might earn a living as she sought further guidance about her next steps. They also helped plan how she might announce her decision to leave her job, and how she might rest and recover from her near burnout. [Later, members of the clearness group and some of her friends and colleagues helped raise money to give Anna two weeks at a retreat center, as a going-away present on the occasion of her departure from the action organization.]

Louisa explained the imaging process. "The purpose is to bring other resources into the picture, beyond our intellects and words. I have found that this process taps into sometimes powerful images which then become material for further reflection by the focus person or cast some new light on the matter before us. Sometimes the person giving an image doesn't know what it means, but I find it works to just let them be and let the focus person discover a meaning eventually. The images belong to the focus person." To begin the imaging process, Louisa stood behind Anna's chair and rested her hands on her shoulders. She asked Anna if she wanted other members of the group to touch her during the process. "Sure," said Anna. The group moved in closer, Judy

held one hand and Karl the other, while Jim grasped her elbow. The group settled into silent worship again and then members shared the images that came to them as they focused on Anna. Judy saw Anna floating with a big grin on her face. Karl saw tension dropping from her like sheets of water. Louisa felt warmth and light flowing from inside of Anna as she strode along a path into the future. Jim seemed uncomfortable with this part of the process, but he quietly held Anna's arm and listened to the others speak.

Before the meeting ended, Louisa again led the group into silent worship and then the meeting closed as all joined hands in a circle. Judy gave Anna the notes she had been taking.

Agenda Outline:

Facilitator (or clerk) opens the meeting, explains format and agenda steps

Period of silent worship or meditation

Sharing from the focus person: brief summary of the question or concern and brief background

Discipline of questions: members ask questions only—short, honest, probing, caring, challenging questions

Break (as needed)

More questions

Focus person's choice about how to proceed next. Some options are: silent worship or meditation with people speaking as they wish; silence, out of which people share images which come to them (optional: members physically touch the focus person); continue with more questions as above; focus person asks questions of the group; members are asked for their reflections or advice

Summary of any clarity reached from the focus person

Agreement on next steps, if any. Give notes to focus person

Closing (silence, singing, joining of hands...)

ORGANIZING A CLEARNESS PROCESS

This section is addressed to the focus person (the person initiating the clearness process), who is, therefore, the "you" addressed here.

There are several steps to setting up a clearness process: choosing a facilitator; choosing the clearness group; meeting with the facilitator; and deciding a format and style for the clearness session.

Choose a Facilitator

The focus person chooses one person to serve as facilitator (sometimes called chairperson, clerk, or convener) to guide the process. This frees you, as focus person, to give full attention to listening and responding in the meeting. As you choose a facilitator, keep in mind the following:

Is this someone who does not have a strong bias, who can keep a clear head, even if the meeting gets emotional?

Is this someone with reasonably good facilitation skills? (Does not have to be an expert).

Is the prospective facilitator someone who feels comfortable with the style of meeting you envision?

Choose the Clearness Group

Clearness groups (or committees) can be as small as three plus the focus person or as large as seven plus the focus person. You can decide the size and the kinds of balance you want in the group, based on the purpose of the meeting. Sometimes the facilitator can help you decide whom to invite. Some considerations:

Try to find a balance among people who know you well as personal friends and people who might have specific information or expertise relevant to the issues at hand.

Choose people who will be reasonably comfortable with the style of meeting you decide upon.

Do you have a friend who is a particularly good source of support, someone who is aware of how you react and knows your emotional needs? Such a person might be a valuable member of a clearness group. (Some focus persons have asked one person to participate in the meeting with the sole function of providing support to the focus person.)

For some it will be important to include a person or persons who share your spiritual perspective.

If the decision is about work or career, someone who knows you well in that area of your life might be included.

A Note on Biases

People who have a distinct bias or strong feelings about the issues or about your decision may or may not be good to have in the meeting. Biases or feelings are not necessarily a problem so long as they are acknowledged openly. Some people with emotional reactions may rule themselves out. Consider whether the person is able to think clearly about you, despite any feelings or biases. For instance, your business partner might be upset about your proposal to leave the business to pursue other dreams, but might still be able to think about whether it would be right for you. Not all parents would be helpful in a discussion of whether their unmarried daughter should have a child as she has always wanted, though some would.

Meet with the Facilitator

The focus person meets with the facilitator before the meeting to discuss several things.

Clearness Question/Problem

Clarify the question or decisions being brought to the clearness meeting. Clearness groups find it difficult to deal helpfully with a vague concern; focus the issues enough to make them manageable. If you have several issues, try to set some priorities among them or look for a unifying theme.

Too vague/general: "I need to figure out my career."

Better: "I want to explore several specific career options, considering how each of the options draws on my skills and engages my passionate interests."

Choosing the Clearness Group

If you have not already selected the clearness group, talk with the facilitator about what other people might be invited. Decide who will ask them to participate and notify the members of the time and place of the meeting.

Task of the Clearness Group

Identify the task of the clearness group. What are you asking of the group? Do you want the group to help you think through a decision? To give feedback? To raise questions and challenge your thinking? To generate suggestions or more options? To help resolve particular dilemmas? To offer support? To test a spiritual call or leading? Another way to approach this is to ask, "Where do you want to be at the end of the meeting?"

Meeting Style and Agenda

Discuss the style of meeting which will meet your needs and draw up a tentative agenda. Look together at the three examples provided in "Formats and Styles for Clearness Meetings" or invent your own tone and agenda.

Questions for Clearness

Look together at the next section on "Personal Preparation for Clearness." Review the section on questions for clearness and decide which of these are the important questions for your problem or dilemma. Or make up new ones. Discuss how you will provide information to group members: in writing ahead of time or in a verbal report in the meeting. (The use of large sheets of newsprint to present information in the meeting is often helpful.)

Support

Arrange for the support you will need in the meeting itself. What are points of potential difficulty? What are you afraid might happen?

Physical Setting

Decide where to have the clearness meeting—in a private space, free from interruptions (including phones!). Arrange for comfortable seating for all and, possibly, ask someone in the group to provide some kind of refreshment for the break or after the meeting.

Decide on a Style and Format for the Clearness Meeting

Clearness is an extremely flexible concept and there is room for a wide range of styles in clearness meetings.

Political activists have had exciting and creative meetings full of social analysis and challenging thinking about the strategic use of the focus person's skills and interests.

Those engaged in spiritual practice have held clearness meetings characterized by attention to a search for discernment based on inner spiritual guidance.

People with an interest in issues of personal growth have included sensitive discussion of how a proposed direction might affect goals

for individual change. For instance, a group might consider how issues of fear about taking visible leadership affect the decision to accept a particular job.

These styles are not mutually exclusive. Many clearness meetings are a blend of two or more of these elements or still other styles. As focus person, you are in a position to determine what kind of meeting you want. For illustration of some of the possibilities, see the section on "Formats and Styles for Clearness Meetings."

PERSONAL PREPARATION FOR CLEARNESS

Preparation for a clearness meeting is almost as important as the meeting itself. The old saw that "what you get out of it is based on what you put into it" applies here. Once you have done the basic work to organize the clearness process, as the focus person, you begin an important part of the clarification process through reflection, considering a set of questions, and deciding what information to share with the clearness group ahead of time.

Personal Reflection

Each individual has his/her own way of reflecting about a set of personal issues. A few of the processes people use include:

- Writing down thoughts/keeping a journal
- Talking with friends or relatives
- Taking long walks
- Reading inspirational or analytical literature
- Meditation/prayer
- Visualization
- Dream interpretation
- Peer counseling
- Therapy

Part of preparation consists of identifying your own process of reflection and applying it to the issue or set of issues you are bringing to the clearness process. For most people, this requires deliberately setting aside time in busy lives.

Questions for Clearness

The questions listed below are meant to stimulate thinking by the focus person before a clearness meeting. You might choose to answer some of them in a clearness statement for distribution to all members of the group prior to the meeting. Some might be useful in your process of reflection but need no direct communication to the group.

The questions purposely represent a wide variety. They certainly do not exhaust all of the possible questions. Only some are relevant to any particular clearness. You are invited (with help from the facilitator, if desired) to choose among them or to devise new ones. You might also read the section of this book on Strategic Questioning.

We suggest that you contemplate these questions one at a time. Think about each question and see if it connects to important issues for you. If so, mark it for further reflection. If not, move on.

Questions for Sorting

We have found it valuable for the focus person to sort out several important dimensions in relation to proposed directions or decisions. These dimensions tend to fall into the overlapping categories of feelings, thoughts, and inspiration or intuition.

What are your strong *feelings* about the issues before you? Is there past history which makes this question particularly difficult? Are there elements of joy? Stress? Excitement? Fear? What is your gut sense of the right way forward for you?

What is your best and most creative *thinking* about these issues? What do you think is the most logical or reasonable direction for you to take? What is your analysis of the political or social change elements of the decision?

What is your *inspiration or intuitive sense* about the issues before you? What images come to you about your future? What cherished vision do you hold about these issues? For those who practice a spiritual discipline, what arises out of your process of prayer or meditation?

Specific Questions

What elements of your personal history are relevant to the decision being made? How does that history affect you now?

What are your present commitments? How do you spend your time and how do you feel about those priorities?

What do you need in your life in order to function well and creatively? Do you pay attention to those needs?

What is holding you where you are? What is pushing you into new directions? What comes from inside you? What comes from outside you?

If you sense spiritual guidance, where is it leading you?

What are your dreams? What are the barriers you perceive to reaching them? How might you overcome those barriers?

Imagine yourself at some future event which represents your attaining some aspect of your dreams. How did you get there? "Dream backwards" from that point in the future to the present.

What are you living for? What keeps you from living fully for the things you want to live for?

What are your long- and short-term goals in terms of: family and relationships, career, social change, personal growth, spiritual life, health, geography and living situation?

What are the specific options you are considering for your future? What are the positive and negative factors you associate with each option? (Suggestion: divide a sheet of paper in two vertically and list the positives on one side and the negatives on the other for each option separately.)

What additional information do you need in order to make a good decision?

What values do you hold which bear upon this decision?

What financial issues impinge on your decision? Are there non-financial resources in your community that might help address financial issues (housing, child care, other in-kind offerings...)?

What are the implications of your proposed action or change in direction for your community, family, fellow workers, etc.?

Write Up a Clearness Statement

Writing a concise statement for clearness starts the process of focusing and clarifying for the focus person. Refining the issues and questions you have is part of this important step.

We have found that members of the clearness group prefer to get basic information about the clearness in advance, which also gives them time to ponder the issues and think about their own questions. This also gives all members of the group a consistent base of information, since all will not know you equally well or in the same contexts.

Based on your reflections, write up at least some of the background information which will be helpful to members of the clearness group and distribute the paper ahead of time. At a minimum, the written paper includes

a statement of the problem, issue or dilemma, an explanation of what you want from the group, plus some background information. Providing this will save valuable time in the meeting; otherwise you will have to spend time laying out facts and considerations in the meeting itself.

Depending on the complexity of the issues involved (and the verbosity of the focus person!) we have seen clearness statements ranging from one page to ten pages. Shorter is better: part of your process of clarification will be deciding what is most important to share in writing or as introductory information in the meeting.

Timothy's Story

Timothy was seventeen and about to finish his junior year in high school. During that school year he had negotiated a special student status, attending a minimum number of classes, working on special projects, and working at an alternative school with younger children. He was at a point of trying to figure out what he should do during his senior year. In consultation with his parents and teachers, he decided to hold a clearness meeting.

Timothy and his parents asked a friend of the family familiar with the clearness process to facilitate the meeting. In addition to Timothy and his mother and father, they invited his school advisor, another teacher who knew him well, and another close adult friend to participate on the committee. Timothy considered including people his own age, but decided he was comfortable with the adults in the group and did not think any of his friends were exactly right for the process.

The facilitator met with Timothy ahead of time and helped him think about how to prepare for the meeting. They identified the main options Timothy was considering: finishing high school in a fairly conventional way; taking the year to do some interesting projects including, possibly, an internship in Washington; and attending a local community college part time while taking a GED exam for his high school diploma.

With the facilitator, Timothy decided that he would think about the positive and negative aspects of each of his options and write those up on sheets of paper for presentation to the clearness group. He would also consider his longer-term hopes and plans and how the different options might affect them. He noticed that each of the possibilities he was considering contained pulls and tugs that represented things he wanted. He would have to make some choices. Timothy also began to think about the effects of his decision on his friends, family, and the school community. These were the factors he talked about when he met with his clearness committee.

ROLE OF THE CLEARNESS GROUP

Prophetic listening is listening to others in such a way that we draw out of them the seeds of their own highest understanding, of their own obedience, of their own vision, that they themselves may not have known were there. Listening can draw forth out of people things that speaking to them cannot.

— Elise Boulding

The members of the clearness group have a rewarding and challenging role. They must find ways to be supportive and affirmative while also raising questions forthrightly. Clearness group members strive to find a balance between open recognition of good thinking and sensitive challenges of fuzzy-headedness or false assumptions.

There are roles which members of a clearness group do not play. Clearness committees are not advice givers or therapists. As much as possible they suppress their own curiosity, their problem solving ability, and their urges to perform, to appear wise, insightful, or intelligent. What is left, then? What remains is helping the focus person remove barriers to their own seeing, listening, sensing, and thinking—and through that process discover the focus person's own clarity. Mostly, clearness group members achieve this by listening, questioning, and, at times, by remaining silent and waiting.

Clearness Group Functions

A clearness group performs several functions, some of which are discussed below.

Listen

Good listening has amazing potential for generating creative thought. One of the primary roles of the clearness group is to listen to the focus person. At times, it is useful to repeat back or paraphrase what has been heard.

"Robin, as I have listened to what you have been saying, it appears that you are most concerned about making sure that you maintain solid time with your children and that other things must take second place to that. Am I right?"

Pose Questions

Draw out the thinking and/or feelings of the focus person, prompting understanding of motivations, reasoning, or insights at a deeper level. The most helpful questions are honest, probing, caring, challenging, and open. Loaded questions, questions with built-in advocacy, or questions asked out of curiosity are generally not helpful. Use questions not to raise doubts or worries but to spark creativity and to make sure important considerations are addressed. Group members will benefit from reading Fran Peavey's section on "Strategic Questioning" in this book as they prepare for a role as loving interrogators.

Some clearness groups adopt a discipline of only asking questions for some or all of the meeting. Jan Hoffman's article in Appendix II provides a model for this.

"Dale, how might you build a career which combines your interest in environmental issues and your skills in graphic design?"

"Chris, how might you use this time of being primarily a parent to prepare for your career after you are no longer engaged in full-time parenting?"

"Mary, you spoke movingly about the image of your hands in the clay. When you close your eyes and hold that image and the question of your future as a teacher in your mind's eye at the same time, what comes to you?"

Important Note: The focus person has the right to decline to answer a question or questions, for whatever reason, stated or unstated.

Reflect Back

Members of the clearness group play a valuable role when they reflect back to the focus person things they see or hear. Group members often perceive something that the focus person does not. Members can avoid second-guessing or psychoanalyzing by maintaining an attitude of respectful inquiry.

"George, from everything that you have said, and from the note of frustration in your voice, I sense a deep desire in you to be used to your fullest potential, to make the most complete contribution that you are able to make. It seems that this is where you feel most blocked. Does that ring true to you?"

Suggest Other Options or Possibilities

At times the focus person will bring several options for future directions to the group. The group can give feedback on those, but may also generate other options not yet considered.

"Terry, you have been concentrating on either getting a full-time job or on seeking a large grant. How about a part-time teaching assignment at a college combined with a subsistence stipend for the organizing work you want to do?"

Point Out False Assumptions

A clearness group can help identify motivations or assumptions which the focus person might consider discarding or altering. For instance, people often feel compelled to move in some direction in order to fulfill someone else's expectations (parents, friends, partners, lovers). Or perhaps the focus person has been pursuing a personal goal which is either unrealistic or too modest.

"Brendan, I would like to push you a bit on this issue about being a professional singer with a social change message. You have a great voice and a wonderful stage presence. It might take some time and effort to make it pay, but I wonder why you are relegating this passionate part of yourself to part-time hobby status."

Consider Feelings

The group cannot resolve, remove, or deny feelings. Nor can it act as a therapist. It can, however, consider emotions as one element of the focus person's decision-making process. The group plays a role in creating an atmosphere in which feelings, even difficult ones, can be expressed openly and listened to actively. On occasion, a group member may sense emotional issues which are affecting the perspective and choices of the focus person but which remain hidden. In that case, the group member may wish to bring the issues into the open.

"Pat, we haven't talked much about the option of going back to school for a master's degree. Every time we touch on it you seem to back away. How do you feel about academic work or studying?"

Take Notes

The focus person may want someone to take notes in the meeting to free the focus person to pay attention to what is being said—and to refer back to after the meeting. One person may agree to take notes for the whole meeting, or the role can be shared among several people. Be sure to get clear instructions about what kind of notes to take: just major points, questions posed, insights, or suggestions. Some focus persons use a tape recorder.

Perform Follow-up Tasks

In some instances, the group can be helpful after the clearness meeting. Members of the group might agree to perform a specific follow-up task, to find information, or to help secure needed resources. At times, the group is not finished after one session and decides to meet again. Towards the end of the meeting, the facilitator summarizes such agreements.

"All right, let's see. Andy, you said you would meet with Pat next week to help her develop a financial plan for the next year. Emily will be available to give phone support to Pat during her visit home. I will check with her in two months to see how things are proceeding and to figure out if the clearness group needs to meet again."

Spirit and Intuition

For people with a religious or spiritual outlook, there will be a "third presence" in the clearness meeting. In addition to the focus person and the clearness group, a source of spiritual guidance is present. This presence is called by many names—and all share the idea that if we open ourselves to this power, our way forward will be made clear. Even for those with a distinctly nonspiritual approach, the informed hunch or insistent intuition can play an important role.

Confidentiality

In most cases, everything said by anyone in a clearness meeting is considered confidential and not to be taken out of the room unless there is an explicit agreement otherwise. If there is question or confusion about this, the group discusses it before the end of the meeting.

A Clearness Group Is Not a Support Group

Members of a clearness group agree to help with a particular set of decisions, usually meeting only one or two times. They are not necessarily able, or even the best people, to deal with longer-term support. Short-term follow-up roles are appropriate, but avoid those that might develop into ongoing support functions. If, through the clearness meeting, it appears that ongoing assistance for the focus person is needed, establish a new group *specifically for that purpose*. (Note that this kind of one-way care and assistance for a person with a particular need is different from the process of ongoing mutual support described in the Support Group section of this book—although support groups often rally to assist a member in crisis).

Abigail called a clearness committee after the traumatic experience of date rape, to decide whether to press criminal

charges. Among others, the clearness group included two lawyers and a therapist, all concerned but extremely busy people. After the clearness meeting, as Abigail proceeded with the court case, her friend Jean, who had also participated in the clearness session, helped her set up a support group, friends who literally stood by her through every step of the agonizing legal process.

ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

In addition to the roles described in "Organizing a Clearness Process," the facilitator serves a number of functions during the actual meeting.

Facilitation

The facilitator plays the usual group process roles: introducing the agenda, watching time, encouraging relatively equal participation by all members of the group, watching group energy and the need for breaks. The facilitator does not control the process but helps the group decide what it wants to do, remaining particularly sensitive to the needs of the focus person.

Attention to the Focus Person

Throughout the meeting, the facilitator maintains close communication with the focus person, asking, "Are you getting what you need from the group?" It is possible for the focus person to become overwhelmed—by the amount of ideas generated, by challenges from the group, by certain kinds of critical or negative feedback, or by the feelings associated with the decisions involved. If the facilitator senses that the group has gone beyond the ability of the focus person to absorb what is being said, it may be wise to call for a break or some other shift in focus. However, if important issues are being raised, return to them when the focus person is ready (that is, don't avoid issues just because they are difficult). The facilitator also monitors the group, noting when individual agendas or biases enter the discussion in a destructive manner.

Keeping the Group on Track

By meeting with the focus person before the meeting, the facilitator knows the what the focus person wants from the clearness. One role of the facilitator is to keep this goal in mind. At the same time, clearness groups often head off in unexpected and rich directions to great benefit. When this happens, the facilitator must judge whether this is a distracting tangent or an important area

to explore. The facilitator can pose the dilemma to the group and the focus person and ask them to decide how to proceed.

Decision Making

In most cases, the decision is really in the hands of the focus person and the group's role is to assist that process. On occasion, however, the group may be asked to make a decision as a group.

When they must make a group decision, most clearness groups use a consensus model of decision-making. The facilitator guides the group towards an agreement. Normally, after some discussion and exploration of options, the facilitator will test for consensus by stating what appears to be an emerging proposal, asking the group to agree or disagree. At this point, group members might indicate that they support the proposed direction, or they might suggest changes in the proposal. Some might actually disagree. Discussion and attempts at consensus continue until the facilitator is able to state a proposed decision to which all can agree (even if some continue to have reservations). Note: A facilitator who is confused or lacks ideas can ask for a proposal or statement of consensus from other members of the group. (For more on the consensus process, see "What Makes Groups Work" in the Support Group section of this book and various resources listed in the bibliography.)

Process Notes

Most elements of the clearness meetings described in "Formats and Styles for Clearness Meetings" are self-explanatory. The following notes are offered to help facilitators (and focus persons) plan meetings.

Opening or Gathering

An opening activity is used to help a group gather and focus. In groups where people do not know each other ahead of time, some form of introduction may be most appropriate. Other ideas include sharing on a specific topic, meditation or silence, and singing. Openings (and closings) are not meant to be ritualistic, although many communities have activities they enjoy doing together regularly, which are part of their life together.

Closing

Closings provide a group ending to the meeting before people depart. Many of the same activities which are appropriate for openings can be used as closings. Some other forms of closing include: each person sharing something he/she is looking forward to; standing in a circle holding hands; and quick affirmations of the focus person or the members of the group.

Check-in

A check-in can be used as a gathering exercise. The purpose of a check-in is to provide a way for people to become fully present in the meeting, by sharing very briefly whatever they need to. This may be things going on that day or over several weeks or months. In a sense each person says, "This is what is happening in my life. Now I am going to set all of that aside and focus on the meeting." A check-in is also a way for group members to get to know each other. For a full description see "Checking-In" in the Support Group section of this book.

Bias Check

Members of the clearness group often have close personal ties to the focus person and, possibly, a personal stake in the decision being made. They may have strong feelings or prejudices about "what the focus person should do" or "what the most sensible future direction is." The bias check is an opportunity to state these feelings openly early in the meeting, so that they do not subvert the process. It is not necessary to judge or even discuss the biases people reveal, only to listen in order to understand their perspective.

Affirmations

Because clearness meetings typically involve puzzling decisions and difficult emotions, it is helpful to balance that struggle. Expressing affirmations of the focus person is one way to do that. Various methods can be used, depending on the wishes of the focus person. Some groups simply brainstorm a list of strengths while someone writes them up on newsprint. Others put a large piece of paper on the wall and ask members of the group to write strengths, gifts, and/or assets on it. Telling quick stories which illustrate the focus person's positive attributes is another way.

Evaluation

Through evaluating the meeting, we provide an opportunity to learn and improve the process. The facilitator can ask, "What worked well for people?" After members of the group have listed those positive elements (brainstorm style, without debate or commentary), the facilitator might ask, "What might have been better?" As people list those points of difficulty, the facilitator can also ask for positive suggestions for the future. Again, it is not necessary for the group to agree to any of these suggestions; they are offered for everyone's consideration.

In the evaluation, John said, "I had a hard time listening to Karen shouting and crying. I didn't know the group would have to deal with feelings like that." The facilitator asked the group to come up with suggestions for how to handle that in the future. "The focus person or facilitator could warn the members that such

feelings are likely to come up and let people who are uncomfortable step outside during that portion of the meeting." "The facilitator could check with group members to see how they are doing. Maybe reassure them that the expression of feelings is fine." "If you know ahead of time that such feelings will come up, someone in the group could be designated to provide particular attention to emotional issues, so that the other members can relax somewhat."

A FINAL WORD: SURPRISING OUTCOMES

I have found that something uncanny happens in clearness meetings. When the group maintains a respectful, listening, caring approach, and when the group and the focus person are in tune with each other, they encounter moments when there is an almost palpable shift—in perspective, in feeling, in the sense of what is most important. Factors find a new alignment in sometimes surprising ways. Clarity usually flows from those moments. Not always right away; emerging clearness often takes time to season fully.

I have also experienced clearness meetings where the group and the focus person went away frustrated and less clear than when they began the process. In some of those cases, though, when the group came back for a second meeting, and the right question was posed, or perhaps the needed silence and waiting was allowed, the unexpected surfaced and new creativity emerged. When a group works well, they achieve a wonderful magic and chemistry which can lead to new connections among the members.

In my experience, the phenomenon of the uncanny shift can occur in sessions conducted with a fairly intellectual and political tone as well as in sessions characterized by deep spiritual searching. The key seems to be listening profoundly—to the focus person's words, to the wordless passions that lie beneath the surface, to the personality and spirit struggling to find true expression—and thereby drawing out the focus person's own wisdom and integrity.

Making positive affirmation a regular and frequent part of your interaction with people makes it easier to give negative feedback when you need to.

Acknowledge your part of the problem, when relevant.

State feelings or actions of yours which contribute to the problem. "I know that I have not laid out clear expectations about prompt arrival at work, which may have added to the issue of your latenesses."

Practice ahead of time.

If you are uncomfortable or nervous, then find someone who can listen confidentially to you, to check your perceptions, motivations, and clarity. If you are anxious about giving feedback, try roleplaying it a few times.

Get third-party assistance.

In some circumstances, you may want to ask a third person to join you, someone who is acceptable to you and the other person. This person can act as a communications facilitator, making sure you are both hearing each other and providing safety—but definitely not trying to solve the problem.

Be prepared to listen to feedback directed at you from someone to whom you have given feedback!

Appendix II

QUAKER
RESOURCES ON
CLEARNESS
AND SPIRITUAL
DISCERNMENT

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CLEARNESS AMONG QUAKERS AND OTHERS

Peter Woodrow

The use of clearness committees, and related processes, has a long history within the Society of Friends (Quakers), beginning during the first decades of its existence in the last half of the 17th century.

Quakerism is a mystical spiritual movement, believing that each individual has the capacity to develop a personal relationship with God within and to be guided by that Inner Teacher. A person living true to that "Light Within" or "Inner Teacher," then, might be "led" to some action or ministry. Quakers were often persecuted for actions in obedience to such inwardly revealed truth. For example, Quakers held strongly to the equality of persons and refused to give "hat honor" (taking off one's hat to a superior) which led frequently to arrest, fines and imprisonment. In the early days of the Quaker movement, some claimed leadings took idiosyncratic—and sometimes bizarre—forms, such as walking naked through the streets. Some of these actions led to unnecessary persecution and controversy among Quaker groups.

There arose, then, a need to subject the spiritual leadings sensed by one member of the religious community to group or corporate "testing," as a way to protect against scattered and individualistic actions. After all, Quakers asserted (and still assert) that there is one Truth to which we can each bear witness. If we receive contradictory messages regarding the Truth, someone, or all, must be in error. The only solution in this case is to wait upon further guidance from God moving among the faithful.

As the Society of Friends became more organized, it usually fell to the elders of the meeting (the Quaker equivalent of the local church) to perform the function of testing spiritual leadings encountered by members. In practice, a member of the meeting who felt the welling up of a concern or the call to travel and preach to a certain people brought that concern or call before the elders. The group listened to the message and "held it in the Light"—that is, they worshipped together to seek clarity corporately about the authenticity of the leading. In a sense, they acted as a clearness group, deciding, together with the individual who heard the call, whether the leading arose out of the Spirit or from other voices of self-aggrandizement, ego-fulfillment, need for attention, and so on.

In some cases, Friends who felt leadings were confused by them or resistant to doing what seemed to be asked of them. Some of them went to the elders

to share the religious insight they had received, but expressing a wish not to carry it out. In at least some instances, the elders in worship decided that the Friend in question had better follow the leading, even though there was no evident logic to the proposed action at the time. Faithfulness to the leading had unexpected results at times. In other instances, elders questioned the source or authenticity of the call and counseled against action or for further waiting or "seasoning" of the concern.

Eighteenth-century Quaker John Woolman heard many leadings to carry a call to Quakers to give up the practice of holding slaves, and became a pioneer in the early antislavery movement. In many instances, he met with elders from his own meeting or from elsewhere to consider his response to the leadings and how he might carry them out. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, hundreds of Friends experienced leadings which they brought to the elders for clearness: to travel in the ministry, to establish a new school, to provide aid to Native American groups, to work for women's suffrage or against slavery.

In modern days, clearness has been used most frequently among Quakers as a process for a local Friends Meeting to approve marriage or to accept new members. A couple desiring to be married "under the care of the meeting" writes the meeting declaring their wish. The meeting appoints a clearness committee which meets with the couple to determine if they are, in fact, "clear for marriage." In most cases, particularly in the past, the group was trying to make sure that the couple was clear from other entanglements or obligations. Nowadays the committee is more likely to probe to see if the couple is truly ready for the commitment entailed in marriage, and to consider whether the marriage is appropriately performed under the care of the meeting. If the committee decides that the couple is clear, they report back to the monthly meeting which then proceeds with arrangements for the marriage.

Similarly, a person who would like to join a meeting writes a letter to the meeting and states this intention. The meeting, in response, appoints a clearness committee (which sometimes has other names) to meet with the prospective member to see if the person is "clear for membership." In some cases, the committee and the prospective member might discover that the person is not ready—because they do not fully understand Friends practices or because they have doubts due to lingering attachment to another faith tradition. If the person and the committee find the person clear, they report back the meeting as a whole, which accepts the new member.

Note that in the cases of marriage and membership, the appointed clearness committee is charged with the task of actually making a decision, because they must bring a recommendation back to the monthly meeting, so that the meeting itself can take action (take the marriage under its care or accept a person into membership). In the broader application of clearness, normally

the meeting is not asked to take action and the ultimate decision is entirely up to the person initiating the clearness process.

Since the late 1960s, some Friends meetings have begun to use clearness in broader ways, as a resource in the meeting community for Friends who sense a calling or "leading," who are at the point of an important decision in family or career, or who are in crisis and need help through a specific set of decisions.

The history of this revival of clearness among Friends is a bit murky. However, it appears that it was initiated in the 1960s by young Friends active in Young Friends of North America. Several of these Young Friends were immersed in the history and practices of early Friends and sought to revitalize Friends' practice. A number of Young Friends participated in New Swarthmoor, an experiment in Quaker simple living and community which lasted several years (approximately 1969-1973). Within New Swarthmoor, members of the group brought matters of personal decision to the larger group and clearness committees were formed to assist in the individual's decision process.

Some young Quakers who had been active in Young Friends of North America and/or New Swarthmoor also became engaged in Movement for a New Society (MNS), a nation-wide and international network of nonviolent social change groups which was founded in 1971. One of the antecedent groups of MNS was A Quaker Action Group. However, at its founding, MNS decided that it would not (could not) be a Quaker group, since its ambitious program of social transformation required participation by people from diverse backgrounds. Nevertheless, many Quakers were involved, and MNS borrowed freely from many Quaker practices, including a secular form of consensus decision making and the use of clearness for important decisions.

People became members of MNS by joining a working group or collective, and clearness was used for that decision process. In MNS living communities, members joined cooperative households through a modified clearness process as well. As MNS members came upon important decision points in their personal and political lives, clearness was employed as a way for the community to assist the decision of the individual. Based on that experience, a clearness manual, *Clearness: Processes for Supporting Groups and Individuals in Decision-Making* (1976), was written (Section II of this book is a revised version of that manual).

Over time, the experiments with clearness, both from Young Friends and from the applications within MNS, began to seep back into the practice of Friends meetings. The *Clearness* manual, even though written for social change groups, was adapted for use by many Friends meetings. By the middle of the 1980s materials on clearness written specifically for use by Friends began to appear, some of which are reproduced in this appendix. Others are listed in the bibliography.

The basic concept of engaging the religious community in the process of individual spiritual discernment has also begun to gain interest in non-Quaker

groups. Several Catholic orders now use clearness-like processes to aid personal discernment. And some other Protestant churches have developed discernment procedures similar to clearness within their community life. (See *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*, listed in the bibliography.)

Clearness is a flexible concept which will continue to develop among Friends and others who seek to bridge the gap between personal and private matters and the caring spiritual and/or activist community of support.

CLEARNESS COMMITTEES AND THEIR USE IN PERSONAL DISCERNMENT

by Jan Hoffman*

A clearness committee meets with a person who is unclear on how to proceed in a keenly felt concern or dilemma, hoping that it can help this person to reach clarity. It assumes that each of us has an Inner Teacher who can guide us, and, therefore, that the answers sought are within the person seeking clearness. It also assumes that a group of caring friends can serve as channels of divine guidance in drawing out that Inner Teacher.

The purpose of the committee members is not to criticize or to offer their collective wisdom; they are to listen without prejudice or judgment, to help clarify alternatives, to help communication if necessary, and to provide emotional support as an individual seeks to find "truth and the right course of action." The committee must remember that people are capable of growth and change. They must not become absorbed with historical excuses or reasons for present problems, but rather focus on what is happening now and explore what could be done to resolve it.

In a monthly meeting, persons may ask Ministry and Counsel (Worship and Ministry or Overseers) to form a clearness committee. The focus person may also choose her or his committee, gathering five or six trusted friends with as much diversity among them as possible. In either case, formation should be under a discipline of worship, taking care that people are chosen not just because they are friends, but through some discernment process. Note that the process is always initiated by the person seeking clearness, though a friend may ask, "Would a clearness committee be helpful?"

A clerk and recorder should be appointed. The clerk opens the meeting, closes it, and serves as traffic cop in between, making sure that the rules are followed, that everyone who wants to speak may do so, and that there is a common understanding of the degree of confidentiality about the meeting. The clerk also sees to physical details which will nurture an atmosphere of seeking silence: seeing that everyone has a comfortable chair, taking any

telephones off the hook, and making sure the space is enclosed and a 'do not disturb' sign is up if interruptions are likely. The recorder writes down the questions asked and perhaps some of the responses and gives this record to the focus person after the meeting.

The person seeking clearness should write up his or her question in advance of the meeting and make it available to committee members. The concern should be identified as precisely as possible: relevant background factors should be mentioned; and clues, if any, about what lies ahead should be offered. This exercise is valuable not only for the committee members, but especially for the focus person. When the committee meets, it should be for two to three hours, with the understanding that there may be a second, and even a third, meeting.

Normally, a meeting begins with a period of centering silence. When the focus person is ready, she or he begins with a brief summary of the question or concern. The rule for committee members is very simple—but very difficult to follow: members may not speak in any way except to ask the focus person a question, an honest question. That means no presenting solutions, no advice, no "Why don't you...?", no "My uncle had the same problem and he...", no "I know a good diet that would help you a lot." Nothing is allowed except honest, probing, caring, challenging, open, unloaded questions! And it is crucial that these questions be asked, not for the sake of the questioner's curiosity, but for the sake of the focus person's clarity. Caring, not curiosity, is the rule for questioners. Remember that your task is to serve as a channel for the Light to help the focus person deal with the problem or make a decision; neither you nor the committee deals directly with the problem or makes the decision.

Committee members should try to ask questions briefly and to the point, rather than larding them with a lot of background and qualifications. Not only does this help guard against turning questions into speeches, but it may also help open the focus person to some insight that gets obscured when the questions wander. Committee members should also trust their intuitions. Even if a question seems off the wall, if it feels insistent, ask it.

The focus person normally answers the questions in front of the group—and the answers generate more questions. But, it is always the focus person's absolute right not to answer—either because she or he does not know the answer, or because the answer is too personal or painful to be revealed in the group. The more often a focus person can answer aloud, the more she or he and the committee have to go on. But this should never be done at the expense of the focus person's privacy or need to protect vulnerable feelings. When answering, the focus person would do well to keep his or her responses relatively brief so time remains for more and more questions. Some questions seem to require one's whole life story in response: resist the temptation to tell it!

Do not be afraid of silence in the group. In fact, value it, treasure it. The pacing of questioning and answering should be gentle, relaxed, humane. A

*These notes are compiled by Jan Hoffman from her experience and the following sources: Parker Palmer at a conference on Solitude and Community; *Faith and Practice* of Pacific Yearly Meeting (1985), pp. 58–60; and *Living with Oneself and Others* of New England Yearly Meeting Committee on Ministry and Counsel (1985), pp. 50–55. This article may be freely reproduced with credits.

machine gun pace of questioning or answering destroys reflectiveness. If there is silence in the group, it does not mean nothing is happening. It may very well mean the most important thing of all is happening, inside of people.

Well before the end of the session, following at least an hour of questioning, the clerk should ask for a pause and ask the focus person how she or he wishes to proceed. This is an opportunity for the focus person to choose a mode of seeking clarity other than the questions, which have characterized the rest of the session. The recorder continues to record during this time. Possibilities are:

Silence, out of which anyone can speak, under the same discipline as that in other meetings for worship;

Silence, out of which people share images which come to them as they focus on the focus person (this process is often helped if everyone is physically touching the focus person);

The committee continues with more questions;

The focus person asks questions of the committee;

The committee is asked to give advice;

The committee is asked to affirm the gifts they see in the focus person.

Before the session ends, any clarity reached can be shared, if the focus person wishes to do so. She or he and the committee should agree on next steps. If another meeting seems right, it should be scheduled at this time. It may be that the focus person will reach clarity and no further meeting action is necessary. Or it may be clear that a support committee or an oversight committee should be appointed to aid the person in keeping clear and/or in being accountable to his or her initial clarity. Members of the clearness committee are free to release themselves from further commitment or to offer to serve.

The clearness committee works best when everyone approaches it in a prayerful mood (which does not exclude playful!), inwardly affirming the reality of each person's inner guidance and truth. We must give up the notion that we can know what another's truth is and simply try, through our own human experience, to ask questions that may help remove anything that obscures the other's inner light.

CLEARNESS AND COMMITTEES ON CLEARNESS

*Pacific Yearly Meeting**

One of the special joys of a Friends Meeting is the recurring reminder that each person contributes to the spiritual strength of the loving community and that the community is a guiding and sustaining force in the life of each individual. This mutual relationship strengthens the Meeting and produces a bond of love and trust among its members, helping the Meeting to find unity in its spiritual life and harmony in its actions. An important evidence of such spiritual unity in a meeting is that members feel free to ask for help in clarifying personal problems and in making decisions. These may relate to such matters as family adjustments, marriage difficulties, separation, divorce, stands to be taken on public issues, a new job, a required move to a distant area, a concern for personal witness, traveling in the ministry, and other personal decisions. Meetings usually respond to such requests for help by appointing committees on clearness+ (sometimes called committees of concern).

A committee on clearness meets with the seeker, not as professional counselors nor as friends discussing a problem and giving advice, but rather as caring Friends, drawing on the same resources that bind us together in meeting for worship. Maintaining a spirit of openness and prayerful waiting, the committee members seek to help the individual become clear about a problem or impending decision by serving as channels for divine guidance. Their purpose is not to criticize, to elder, nor to offer their collective wisdom; they are there to listen without prejudice or judgment, to help clarify alternatives, to help communication if necessary, and to provide emotional support, as an individual, or a small group such as a family, seeks to find God's will. As in a

*From *Faith and Practice* (1985), which provides guidance to Monthly Meetings, the Quaker equivalent of a congregation, which have a monthly meeting for business. Pacific Yearly Meeting is a grouping of monthly meetings in California, Nevada, Hawaii, Mexico City, and Guatemala City.

+The term "clearness" referred originally to clearness before marriage from other entangling engagements or obligations. Today, if the problem or decision involves a possible Meeting action (such as marriage, membership, release of a member, or the like), then both the Meeting and the seeker must arrive at clearness before the action may be taken.

meeting for business, all parties seek clearness, hoping to find "truth and the right course of action." In meetings of a committee on clearness, however, there is no need to find unity; the seeker's clearness is being served and the committee must finally stand aside, trusting that it may have been used to help the seeker see a problem more clearly or to make his or her own decision in the Light. In no case does a committee on clearness make the decision.

A committee on clearness is always formed at the request of the person or persons seeking clearness, though such a request may follow upon an offer by Friends in the Meeting to be of help. The seeker may initiate the forming of a committee by making a request of the Meeting, or by asking any overseer of the Monthly Meeting. In every case, the request becomes the responsibility of the Committee on Oversight.

It is the duty of the Overseers to have preliminary talks with the seeker on the nature of the problem. Such talks may convince the committee that the seeker needs professional counseling, rather than the help of a Meeting committee, and will advise the seeker accordingly. Alternatively, it may be clear to the committee that the seeker is already clear as to the course of action to be taken, but needs counsel from appropriate Friends on how to carry out the action or decision (the *how* rather than the *whether*). In such a case, the Committee on Oversight should itself counsel with the seeker.

If, however, in the judgment of the Committee on Oversight, a clearness committee is appropriate, it will, in consultation with the seeker, appoint such a committee, designating a convener from among its members. A clearness committee should be composed of persons who, because of gifts and background, seem particularly suitable to help with the problem. It is essential that a committee on clearness include only people who are acceptable both to the Committee on Oversight and to the seeker. A committee on clearness may include people of varied ages and experience, and will normally include from three to five members unless the Committee on Oversight feels that special circumstances require a larger committee.

When the problem is one in which, in the judgment of the Oversight Committee, the Meeting is too emotionally involved to be helpful, members of the committee on clearness may be selected from outside the Meeting community, from, for example, the Committee on Ministry and Oversight of the Quarterly or Yearly Meeting. It is worth repeating that Friends seek clearness in the Light; partisanship and emotional involvement are to be avoided in favor of openness and a desire to be used as a channel for the Light so that the person or persons seeking help may reach clearness.

The experience of Friends has shown the usefulness of questions like the following to be considered by persons who have been asked to serve on a committee on clearness, and of a few advices for those who agreed to do so.

Questions for Those Asked to Serve on a Committee on Clearness

1. Do you feel sufficiently at ease with the seeker and with the other members of the committee to work with them? Can you labor with them truly to provide an atmosphere in which divine guidance can be sought?
2. If it is a family decision, can you listen without prejudice or bias to each member who is involved?
3. Can you devote sufficient time and energy to this committee, knowing that it may take several meetings and many weeks or months to clarify the problem and provide support while the decision is made and carried out?
4. Can you keep the committee discussions confidential and avoid gossiping or referring to them outside the committee unless those requesting the help of the committee are comfortable with a wider sharing of their problem?

Advices for Members of a Clearness Committee

1. Try to listen to the other persons present, rather than just waiting for your turn to talk. Give equal attention to each person present, whether adult or child.
2. Remember that people are capable of change and growth. Do not become absorbed with historical excuses or reasons for present problems. Focus on what is happening now to perpetuate the situation or to require a decision.
3. Do not take sides if it is a family problem. Each person contributes to the problem, its continuation and its solution.
4. Try to avoid all suggestions of blame. It destroys openness and makes clearness difficult or impossible to reach.
5. Do not give advice; do not present solutions to others. Do not create dependency by taking over responsibility. Remember that your task is to serve as a channel for the Light to help the seeker deal with the problem or make a decision; neither you nor the committee deals directly with the problem or makes the decision.

Finally, it is important that all members of a committee on clearness feel responsibility to help the convener establish and maintain a right spirit in all meetings of the committee. The convener has the responsibility, but all members should cooperate in surrounding each meeting with a waiting silence, in beginning and ending with worship, in asking for moments of worship during a meeting, and in calling frequently to mind that a meeting of a committee on clearness is not an occasion for professional or amateur counseling, but a spiritual exercise, one in which Friends hope to be channels by means of which one or more seeking individuals may receive light on a problem and divine guidance for a decision which they—with God alone—must make.

CLEARNESS COMMITTEES, COMMITTEES OF CARE, AND OVERSIGHT COMMITTEES

*Canadian Yearly Meeting**

Introduction

Faced with difficult decisions, or imperative concerns, Friends have often asked others to help discern the will of God and the leading of the Spirit in their lives. Friends in difficult situations have also asked others for help and encouragement to enable them to carry out their tasks rightly. Sometimes these arrangements are informal, sometimes the Meeting itself takes the initiative. Friends are then found who will meet those in need and offer their presence, prayers, love and support.

There are three types of committees on which Friends may draw. These are: Clearness Committees, Committees of Care, and Oversight Committees. In the work of all of these committees, the qualities of clearness and discernment are paramount.

Historically, Friends came to Meeting for help in discerning whether their concerns were spiritually based leadings, or based on their own will. The following paragraphs stem from such a background. They are relevant to the work of today's committees, which often must struggle through the more profane world of day-to-day life, and its personal problems, which Friends still seek to illumine with a spark of the divine.

Douglas Steere writes that,

"... Concerns and the process of discernment require further scrutiny to understand their central place in Quaker practice. The Book of Acts in the New Testament sparkles with vivid concerns and the following of divine guidance, at no matter what the cost. Believing that we are still in the Apostolic age and that we do not work alone, Quakers have experienced in their corporate meetings for worship and their private devotions, leadings to which they have sought to be attentive. The small inner nudges . . . may be swiftly cared for, but concerns that may involve changes of career or that involve others in their unfolding call for more deliberate care. How such guidance is to be regarded and how it is to be followed raises

the whole question of discernment. In what ways may individual Friends be helped to test the authenticity of a concern and how may they be assisted in what this may demand of them? Here again the strong corporate side of Quakerism . . . has been able to furnish spiritual assistance. . . . The traditional procedure is to call together a small committee of clearness."*

Discernment and Clearness

Some individuals are blessed with a gift for discernment—they seem to know what to do. Others must come by this skill with more effort. The key to this in the religious area is prayer. In doing this we bring ourselves into the Light. We also bring our understandings and our confusions; we bring our hopes and fears, our ambitions and desires. With divine help we may lay them all down, and be left with clarity and thanksgiving. Getting from here to there requires testing our thoughts and our feelings by the Light. We may be granted a vision of clarity directly; but more often we must look for examples of discernment reflected in the lives and decisions of others. The Bible, being a record of the work of the Spirit through history, is a most valuable source for such vicarious experiences. Friends may also make use of the Journals kept by the great ministers of our Society—George Fox, John Woolman, Elizabeth Fry, Stephen Grellet, Elias Hicks, *et al.*

We may also look to more recent records and the experience of those we know, and should not neglect our own journals. It is all too easy to forget an experience of divine guidance that we may have been blessed with in the past, when we are overwhelmed with a dilemma in the present. The practice of thanksgiving helps to banish forgetfulness and allows us to grow throughout our lives. Prayer and study usefully undergird the work of committees as well as individuals if they are to discern the "way forward." Where individuals feel too inexperienced to feel that they can rightly discern God's will alone in prayer, they may consult more experienced Friends—not to make their decision for them, but to help them with the process of discerning it. The most commonly used consultative process, and often the best, is for the perplexed individual to go to a number of people informally and hear what they have to say on the matter—to personal friends, colleagues, professionals and members of the Meeting, and then to meditate over what they have learned, and then act as the "way opens."

Clearness is a deep inner certainty based on spiritual discernment. Clearness takes time. It cannot be achieved for a Meeting or an individual while there is an impediment or stop in the mind. Friends' testimony is that

* From *Organization & Procedure* (1990)

*Steere, Douglas. *Introduction to Quaker Spirituality*. Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1984, pp. 42-43.

with divine assistance and others' help, the liberation and assurance of true clearness will come.

General Guidelines for All Three Committees

Initiation

These committees are "under the care" of Monthly, Half-Yearly, or Yearly Meetings, or their Meetings of Ministry and Counsel. Their initiation, however, differs.

Clearness Committees are initiated by the individual, who approaches the relevant Meeting with a concern/problem that necessitates a decision. When the decision is reached, the work of the Committee ceases.

Committees of Oversight are initiated by Meetings, which feel that the "right ordering" in carrying out something must be safeguarded.

Committees of Care may be initiated by either the individual or the Meeting to give continuing support to the person in an undertaking, or because the person needs help.

The latter two kinds of Committees last much longer than a Clearness Committee.

Function

Committees of Care and Clearness Committees are concerned primarily with people. Committees of Oversight are concerned primarily with tasks. Thus, those Friends serving Meetings may have an Oversight Committee to which they are accountable and a Committee of Care which supports them personally.

Maintaining Function

Committees should not change their functions without reference to the authorizing body. For example, Committees of Clearness should not allow themselves to become ongoing Committees of Care, and Oversight Committees should not allow themselves to become Committees of Care while still functioning as Oversight Committees.

Membership

A membership of two to four persons is recommended. In the case of Clearness Committees and Committees of Care, the person concerned is consulted about the choice of members. In the case of Committees of Oversight, the person is not consulted.

Service on these committees can be very demanding and Meetings should be mindful that they cannot always supply the right members for such

committees. If that is so, they should be prepared to reach out to other Meetings, or refer to appropriate resources in the community.

It is essential that members work as a team and do not work as individuals with the Friend concerned, without the knowledge and approval of the other members.

Clerk

The first choice for Clerk would be a Committee member who is also a member of the Meeting's Ministry and Counsel. The Clerk must see that all members are clear as to their duties, their terms of reference, and the length of service expected of them. The Clerk should oversee the sharing of expectations of one another on the part of all participants, including the Friend(s) asking assistance.

The Clerk either is, or appoints a recorder. It is the Clerk's responsibility to see that any notes are disposed of properly, according to the type of Committee. This is particularly important because documents may, on occasion, be subpoenaed by a court of law. The Clerk should consult with the Friend concerned as to how the Committee can best work with the Friend. For example, does the Friend function best in a structured, or, an informal, situation?

Resources

Committee members will find it useful to know of helpful agencies and support services, groups and individuals outside the Meeting community.

Time given to reading and prayerful preparation in advance will help to generate an atmosphere of trust and care. Only rarely will a committee have only one meeting. A reasonable interval between meetings allows for reflection, prayer, and growth for all concerned.

Meetings Conducted "In the Manner of Friends"

The location of meetings is important; there needs to be an atmosphere of privacy, comfort, and concern for the reputation of others. In all cases, the committees will maintain careful sensitivity to the privacy of the Friend(s) concerned.

In an atmosphere of support and caring, the person(s) will be free to say what they think and feel. To listen creatively involves faith in Friends' patience, a desire to understand, and help to clarify problems and needs. During meetings, the committee will raise questions, suggest options, and share experiences where appropriate. Time should be allowed for prayer.

An immediate solution is not always possible in the situations which come before us, and the seeking for divine guidance may bear fruit much later in the lives of all concerned. These committees are one way of providing friendship and assistance within the Meeting family. In all exchanges based on love we are both givers and receivers of divine blessings. The use/operation of these

committees not only helps the Friends involved, but greatly strengthens the Meetings as a whole.

Notes

The recorder may make notes of the discussion and decisions. These confidential notes should be read back and copies given to the concerned Friend(s) and the Clerk of the committee. Because notes could be evidence in a court of law, when the committee is laid down, all notes and minutes should be handed over to the concerned Friend(s), to be kept or destroyed as desired. No copies should be retained by the Meeting. The committees should report to the Meeting that it has met, and, if appropriate, its decisions.

Special Guidelines for Each of the Three Committees

Clearness Committees

Purpose and Function: a) to help Friend(s) determine the will of God as well as of himself or herself in making a difficult decision; b) to help Friend(s) test the genuineness and ramifications of a concern that involves the Meeting.

The Friends with whom they consult will not make their decision for them, but will help them in the process of discerning God's will. Clearness Committees are set up for a limited time only, until the purpose is completed. They report to their appointing Meeting the dates of their meetings, and when their task is completed, so that the committee can be laid down.

Appointment: Suitability of committee members should be considered with care by the Meeting concerned, as often sensitive issues are being considered. The acceptability of suggested members should first be cleared with the Friend(s) concerned, before final appointment.

Committees of Care

Purpose and Function: a) to provide help, both practical and spiritual, during times of stress in the lives of members of the Meeting, e.g., bereavement, separation, illness, career changes, etc.; b) to sustain Friend(s) engaged in demanding Meeting work over a long period. Care must be taken not to create a dependency, but to enable Friends to be independent, and to make their own choices.

Appointment: A wider choice of people is needed for Committees of Care than for Clearness Committees, as the life of the Committee is so much longer, and the people may need to rotate. The choice of members should be approved by the Friend(s) in need. The need for the Committee should be reviewed periodically by the appointing Meeting, and the Committee should be laid down when its job is done.

Oversight Committees

Purpose and Function: An Oversight Committee is accountable to its appointing Meeting for the execution of the responsibilities of the Friend being overseen; the oversight is of the proper fulfillment of the task, and not of the person concerned. Care for the person, if necessary, is the responsibility of a Committee of Care. Membership in the two, if needed, should not overlap.

The Oversight Committee and the designated Friend(s) should meet with the Clerk of the appointing Meeting to clarify expectations, including terms of reference, responsibilities, and a clear job description, at the outset. The terms of reference should be reviewed periodically, as well as the need for the program, task, or office itself.

It is essential that an Oversight Committee function as a whole, and that its members not work independently. The Oversight Committee serves the Meeting as a two-way channel for the messages and comments on the program, task, or office being supervised. This procedure avoids the creation of tensions in the Meeting. Otherwise, a hardworking Friend serves too many masters.

Appointment: The person overseen need not be consulted on membership of the Committee. The members should have skills appropriate to what is overseen. Membership may be changed periodically by the appointing Meeting, because this committee's duration tends to be long.

SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT: THE PERSONAL DIMENSION

Jan Wood*

For me, all the purposes and acts of God rise from and are encompassed by God's love for humankind. The God of Judeo-Christian faith has consistently communicated, "I love you, I want to be with you." This is the theme in the narrative of the patriarchs, in the hoped-for theocracy of Israel, in the blazing anger of destruction and exile, in the provision of a remnant, in the incarnation, in the atonement, in Pentecost, and in the Kingdom-come-now and forever. "I want to eat with you, think with you, play with you, work with you, intercourse with you, share life in all of its complications and wonders." "Fear not, I am with you," has been the one promise that winds its way from Genesis through Revelation, and continues to be a witness to our hearts this very day. It is no fluke that the incarnation of Godness in human form would be called Emmanuel: God with us. The mind-boggling truth is that the *I AM*, the *ALL in ALL*, the transcendent Essence of Being, the source of all that is created wants—even yearns—to be with us. That One has made every provision to bridge the gaps between the infinite and the finite; between perfection and brokenness; between Love and alienation; between Life and Death.

The *I AM* did not set up moralistic hurdles for men and women to jump over to prove their Godward intentions. The Godhead did not scheme a system by which humans could earn a place in the heavens. God asked for relationship. Right and wrong. Good and bad. These are not the essential elements of our navigation towards God. The essential elements of our seeking and remaining in the Presence of God are being in the Truth of ourselves and being in the Truth of the Godhead. There is no system. It is only a relationship. As the Abraham narrative communicates, righteousness is not a matter of doing everything "right." It is a matter of being in appropriate response/position/stance with God. And thus we read in Genesis 15:6, "And he [Abraham] believed in the Lord; and He [God] reckoned it to him as righteousness." Believing was not necessarily an appropriate response to the data that Abraham would be the father of multitudes of descendants. Believing was an appropriate response in the light of *who* was giving the data.

What is appropriate for relationship with a God of Love is to participate/to splash/to swim/to be immersed in the Essence and Presence of God. To align our very being and all that flows from it with Life in God. From this amazing and incredible union of God and human come the fulfillment of our paradoxical desires: to be totally, uniquely fulfilled in our individuality and, at the same time, to be in union with all the universe. Personhood. Fully unique. Fully joined. We are virtually driven by our natures to find this our resting place in the universe. Our home. Life.

The fact is that we humans try to find Life where it cannot be found. Life is found in total union with the Godhead. Yet, what we try to enact with Him/Her is a loose affiliation. But that does not work to bring us the deep desires of our heart. We try to eat the fruit that would lure us with godlike control and knowledge. But it doesn't work. We take shortcuts of self-absorption that leave us with ashes in our mouths. For everything that is inappropriate to the Truth of God and of ourselves is dysfunctional for Life. A distortion. A cruel counterfeit that saps our personage, our energy and leaves us with only the bitter dregs of death—now and forever. That is the essence of evil. Non-God. Non-Reality. Non-functional. Non-Life. It is the antithesis of Life, Substance, Reality. Its power is a manipulation of life's elements. It can only usurp creation and unravel it. It can never create. Its forgeries create illusion and deception. It is as solid as shadows. Yet it is no clumsy counterfeit. Even the elect can be fooled. Discernment is the Life-saving magnetism to the heart of God that reveals the forgery for what it is.

One does not escape evil by doing good behaviors. Goodness is simply a fragrance that is given off by Life, an evaporation from the essence of God. (Mark 9:18) Badness doesn't damn a person. Badness is the stench of non-alignment with Life. It is the rot, decay of that which is separated from the vitality/the sap of aliveness.

Therefore, to discuss the problem of discernment at the level of good and bad, right and wrong, choices/behaviors/acts would lead us astray. Discernment is not the awareness of error; it is the envisioning of truth. The core of discernment is to be so filled with Godness, to be so in-Life that all that is illusion and non-Reality falls off like the ineffectual sham that it is. To know God is to see the universe as it is. To not be fooled or deluded. To be rooted and grounded in the heart of God. To live and have our being there. George Fox was one of the most discerning men of Christendom. His sensibilities were sharpened almost beyond what he could bear. But seeing the size and shape of death around him was not his place of empowerment. He could not rest until he finally saw the ocean of Light and the Love flow over the ocean of darkness. Then in the Truth of the realities of the universe, he had a place to stand. A place from which he could not be moved. He became a true discernor.

The early motions of discernment in a person are often cast in thoughts and perceptions: "something is wrong." Discerning persons grow up feeling that

*Adapted from a talk given at Friends Consultation on Discernment, Quaker Hill Conference Center, 1985. (Original document out of print.)

they are critical and judgmental. They are often deeply troubled by things that no one else seems to perceive. The good news is that the person is beginning to perceive *under*, to question the forgeries of the universe, to worry and be troubled that others are not perceiving the same realities. But I suspect that discernment is not mature and health-giving until one's vision is filled with the view of God, His nature, Her purposes, Their impact upon the present situation. The discernor must not only recognize the evil that would so easily beset us, but also be a fanatical and consistent envisioner and practitioner of redemption. That is the heart of God. For redemption is that motion of Life that moves into the eye of evil and explodes its arrangement from the inside out; freeing each element of the situation to be rearranged for Life.

If we were to bring to this discussion the basic notion that life-in-God is a process of being right—"righter" than the "lost"—we will view discernment as a vehicle for keeping us safe from being wrong or mistaken. If we see *EVIL* as a powerful enemy, we will demand of discernment the ability to keep us alert and informed of evil which is "out there to get us." If we have forgotten the lesson of Galatians, are living under our brand of legalisms to entitle us to God's favor, we will use discernment as a tool to keep ourselves and others "in line." We will use it to know who is "in" and who is "out." If discernment is perverted into sleuthing the evil in persons and in situations, it degenerates into judgment/criticism that is divorced from its fundamental function and nature-Love. All of these approaches will reduce discernment to a sword unto death rather than a scalpel unto Life. Only when discernment is knowing God does the truth of its function begin to emerge.

Characteristics of Discernment

Discernment is a perceptual ability.

Discernment is the ability to perceive good from evil. Its perceptions may come through a feeling, a knowing, or even a physical sensation. Inasmuch as there is an arrangement of life that is a counterfeit; and given that most of the world operates as if the counterfeit were the currency of the universe—discernment sees *under* and *through*. It senses from what spirit, from what source a thought or behavior is coming. It is that illumination that looks under the obvious to perceive what is truly operative. This becomes crucial to those who no longer walk by the Law, but by Grace. Under the Law, one clearly knew where one stood. There were objective yardsticks to see if all were going well. The Law of the Spirit appears to be more illusive to us. Things are not always as they seem. The surface does not always portray the heart. Jesus' recorded conversations are so often enigmatic because he was speaking with discernment to the internal realities rather than to the surface interactions. Jesus always spoke *under* to the core of the issue. And it certainly looked upside-down. The publican is commended for entering the Kingdom of God;

the Pharisee is about to be cast into perdition. So much that seemed to be "right" was challenged by the actions and teachings of Jesus. Jesus' discernment knew the heart. The heart of another. The heart of God.

Discernment is living, not simply perceiving.

The discerning person responds and makes choices that are consonant with his/her seeings. I believe that part of the greatness of Quakers has been that not only have they been a discerning people, but they understood that this was a living matter, not just an evaluation matter. Quakers have been quick to put their lives where their understandings were.

It is necessary to live into the fullness of one's Light and discernment even before we have the whole picture. It would be nice to wait until we see how everything fits together. But that is a luxury that we cannot wait for. What is required is that we walk in what we know now. In the walking, more will be added. In the obedience to the discernment we presently have, more discernment will be opened to us. I believe that is part of the meaning of what Jesus said: that to those who had, more would be given. And to those who had not, it would be taken from them. (Matthew 13:12) In refusing to act on what we already know, we become increasingly blind. If a person is using discernment to keep themselves and others safe from failure, this is a very difficult point to live out. The temptation is to be like the man in the parable that had one talent. He was afraid that he would do the wrong thing, so he took his talent and buried it so it would remain unrisken until he could return it to his master. To live in the partialness of our knowings is a necessary risk of walking in the Spirit.

Discernment is never the "end of the sentence."

We do not discern simply to know. Solomon asked God for a hearing heart to discern good from evil so that he might govern God's people well. (1 Kings 3:9-12) This simple sentence is so rich in the knowledge of discernment! Solomon knew the truth about whose people it was that he was called to govern. How easy it would have been to take it at face value that this was his nation. He understood that discernment was rooted in being able to hear and obey God's voice. And he understood that discernment was not the end of the sentence. Discernment is always a service that is given in Love for others. It is to free, to heal, to call to Truth and Life. Its function is bathed and immersed in Love. Now this can be difficult. Discerning flirts with some of our most deadly failings: the way we use knowings for control, for one-upmanship that feeds our ego, for the idolatry of being our own gods. Some of us shiver when we hear and speak of discernment—for we have felt the sting of discernment that used a knowing to hurt and harm another. And did that in the name of God. Discernment's task is not completed with simply knowing; it needs to bridge to the reality of God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

Discernment is of the Spirit/spirit—God's Holy Spirit and our spirit.

Discernment is not logically derived. This is not at all to say that one ceases to think rationally and well. It is to say, however, that logic is not the judge of whether a discernment is of God or not. The mind becomes informed by the spirit, rather than the other way around. Discernment cannot be empirically judged; it is ultimately a faith statement. It is a gamble of faith. It is obedience to an inward monitor—and upon that we risk all. There is often no immediate indication of whether we are hearing and discerning or whether we are deluded by our own predispositions or we are crazy. After all, it could have been that Abraham was only responding to his deep wish to escape it all at Ur. Or that the pressure simply got too much for him and he began to see and hear things that weren't there. I know of no wonderful criteria by which we can know that we are truly hearing and responding to Truth and Goodness. There weren't any in Scripture. Consider Mary who spent at least thirty-four years out on a limb of believing the unbelievable. There was not a "three point check system" for her. She simply risked all unconditionally. Yes, we do have some checks and balances between our experiential knowings, our understandings of Scripture and the corporate listening of the community of faith. But ultimately we are left to both a personal and a corporate risk. I believe there is no way to get around it. Discernment, far from keeping us "safe," puts us at the outposts of our comfort zones. We choose to live into the fullness of our Light, regardless of the consequences. With Job we echo, "Even though he slay me, yet will I trust that it is God at work in me."

Discernment has only one Source—and all that is discerned is in alignment with the nature of that Source.

It should probably go without saying—but knowledge derived from spirits other than God's Spirit are inappropriate/unholy/unrighteous, and ultimately not life giving. The *ALL in ALL* is the fount of all of our knowing. We need no other. The narrative of the Fall would tell us that humankind has been faked out on this issue before.

Discernment sees the big redemptive picture.

The discerning person so knows God's intents of love and goodness, God's transformation of all weakness, tragedy, and shortcoming that the world is viewed in hope. No longer do we have to avert and avoid the weakness, insufficiency, unworthiness, even the cruelty in ourselves and others. There is a God that can take the worst of ourselves and others and weave it into a tapestry of glory, an alchemy of transformation. The discerning person sees—and therefore can become a co-partner of redemption upon the earth. To step with a willing heart into the middle of life's difficulties, and therefore to explore their sting and horror, is to be a transformer or Light and Life. Discernment not only sees through the sham, it sees into redemption and restoration.

Practical Guidelines for Discernment

So what are the practical guidelines in the matter of individual discernment? The questions that haunt us are: How can I know if I am hearing God? How can I ever tell what is discernment and what is my own internal material? What if I am wrong? What do I do when I see things quite differently from those around me?

My first observation is that discernment *is*. We don't ask for it, nor can we escape it. It is part of our perceptual field. When we turn our heart Godward, there is a reorientation to the universe that happens deep within our spirit. If we listen to the inner sense of reorganization, we begin to order our lives/make choices/live differently in accordance with that new internal sense. As we live out of our new orientation, our new perceptions, we become increasingly astute and wise, increasingly consonant. We walk in the Spirit. It is a natural growth process. What often happens to us, however, is that we do not attend to the new internal paradigm. We are not true to what rises within us. We deny, repress, live in contradiction to the new Life that is rising inside of us. It causes internal havoc. We are at war with ourselves. We are in confusion about our God. We suddenly find ourselves very unsure of what is real and what is not. Then the issue of discernment and guidance and listening becomes very difficult to know about. Interestingly enough, the more out of touch we are with ourselves and our God, the more tenaciously we cling to needing to know. We become desperate not to make mistakes. There is a very frantic quality in trying to find "God's will." We are not at ease with ourselves or our God, when, out of fear, we have chosen not to listen to our Inward Monitor, when we have been too afraid to risk the life of faith.

"But how do I know if it is God?" I hear folks cry agonizingly. I could tell you the standard replies. There is a "self-authenticating" quality to the voice of God within. The sheep know the voice of their shepherd. It is the lining up of all the factors until there is inward and outward consonance. God is recognized by the peace and at-homeness that follows. God is recognized by the movement towards increased love and adoration of the Godhead. One can know if one is following God if one observes the fruit of the Spirit accompanying the process. All of these thoughts are true. But in a sense, none satisfy the questioning heart. Again, I submit to you my own conviction: until the basic decision to risk all is made, no answer will satisfy. Once that decision has been made—all the above are useful, but none are really necessary.

You see, the issue is much less complicated than we make it. The life of faith is that we claim all of ourselves. The good, the bad; the wondrous and the despicable; the beautiful and the ugly; the whole and the broken; the light and the dark. We claim and take responsibility for our being—all of it. In the absolute realness of our entirety, we abandon ourselves into the Presence of God. There we abide. There we live forever. There we never try to "get ourselves together" and do life our own way again. There we do not fear

ourselves and the darkness that is within us, for God's love has encompassed us with grace and mercy and given us Life. There we do not need to beat ourselves down with self-doubts and interrogations, for we are safe—just as we are. The road to many conversion experiences is paved with the words, "Just as I am." What we have not realized is that the Christian life is lived exactly as it was birthed—in the total reality of ourselves thrown upon the mercy of God.

Over and over I experience and observe that the great separations from knowing God come because you and I get out of the reality of ourselves. God wants to interact with us. Not someone else. Not a cleaned up version of ourselves. Not a dehumanized form of ourselves. Just us. It is from this place of being truly ourselves that we make the next choices for Life as they rise within us. We don't expect ourselves to become detached from ourselves and somehow participate in a "pure" Godness. We are not a sterile container through which God's thoughts flow. We don't expect ourselves to be totally right—when were we ever before? We simply offer up the reality and complexity of ourselves to God and to one another, and watch to see what transformations and redemptions are wrought. As we live this out, we find that the agony of expecting our discernment to be other-than-us evaporates like dew in the sun. Wonderful freedom is birthed.

"Well, what if we are deluded in this naive sort of state?" Well, what if we are? If God's transforming grace were enough to cover my sinfulness when I was rebellious, how much more there must be provision when my heart is eagerly leaping into His Presence and Heart. God's nature is faithful to who I am. God knows my limitations. God knows my uprisings and my downfallings. The Godhead will not leave me without a witness. God will send those occasions and persons of correction. Now I hear you say, "No, I don't want to have to be corrected! I want to do it right the first time!" The spirit of pride in us so quickly would move us from that place of trust and communication. Underneath that pride, however, is usually the terrible pain from our childhood that taught us that to be wrong or mistaken was to be unlovable and rejected. Our Lord calls us to a new resting place where there is freedom from the stress and strain of needing to be good, needing to be right, needing to achieve. There is no safer place in the universe than in the Presence of our loving and communicating God.

I am aware that coming to this place requires tender healing for many of us. It certainly has meant that for me. If healing is what we need, so be it. Meet Jesus experientially and let Him speak to your fragmented, frightened condition of being loved so poorly throughout your life. Some know their brokenness, while others have learned to cope by being strong and capable. When we do this, we can't even feel how frightened we are by the conditional love we have received. We only know that if we aren't in control and doing everything right, it feels as if we die. Let God's Spirit pierce the facade of that four-year-old trying to act like a brave soldier. And let the child know the

release of being loved unconditionally by the heart of God. And if you know the healing of God and you have been lured out by our constant enemy, pride, release it. Drop it and return to the truth of yourself.

"Well, what if I do harm to another when I am wrong?" Of course, we will cause pain for another. Our very existence upon the earth means that we will be a cause of great blessing and pain for others. There is no way to avoid giving and receiving pain in this broken world. The very best we can give each other still has the "underbelly" of our own inadequacies and insufficiencies. I cannot be a perfect spouse, a perfect parent, a perfect friend, a perfect Christian—not even if I am centered and walking in the fullness of the Light. You and I are not perfect. We are promised that the brokenness of our lives can be transformed in Jesus Christ. This is not to deny that we are certainly in the process of becoming new creatures. For there is a wonderful miracle that happens as we stay abandoned in the Presence of God that indeed transforms our personhood. What I *do* hold up for question, however, is the prideful internal sense that swells within us, that secretly tells us that we are now "perfect." I question the horrible bondage that comes from that condition in which we try to make that perfection come to pass—expecting that to be the case if we are "truly committed."

But pain is not the end of the story. We are promised that pain need not be unto death—in our life or the life of another. Everyone always has the ability to choose pain-unto-Life. Our brokenness cannot damn another. It may cause great and grievous pain; but it can always be transformed and become the wondrous cause for rejoicing. (Genesis 50:19,20 Romans 8:28) Making a mess in life is humbling and painful, but it is not the end of the world. "But what if someone does make it the end of their world?" you respond. That is their choice. They had a choice to Live, just as you do. I believe that God's gracious mercy does not allow life that is beyond choice. In fact, we see in the Old Testament that when a civilization was beyond the ability to make choices for Life, God ended them. (E.g., Genesis 15:16).

The corollary to this thought is one that has given Quakers such astounding power. Where there is life, there is still God, there is still hope. God's Spirit abides in every person and is capable of being chosen, no matter how badly life's deck seems stacked against him/her. And thus into seemingly hopeless tragedy and cruelty, Quakers tromped, fanning the almost cold embers into a flame of Life.

What Do I Do with the Discernments I Have?

Be true to what is inside. Put weight on it. Live by it. Hold it with sufficient tentativeness to be open to other things. Yet hold it with sufficient tenacity to live it out until moved differently. Change that is of God's Spirit will come from the inside out.

Immerse yourself in the Presence of God. Practice the Presence. The only priority of life worth having is knowing God personally, intimately, experientially. Any other priority is not to see clearly the terrain of *Life*. When in a conflict situation, fill the space with Love and Light. Pay less attention to the dynamics of the conflict, the discernment perception, and center upon the Truth of God in that moment, to that person, to that situation. Stay in the space of Love. Don't be lured out of it!

Offer up what is in you to others. Offer it up in living. Offer it up in words. It is a gift, not a cudgel. Let it rest lightly. Release your discernment from your ego and your expectations. Flow as a stream that is useful to those who can take from you and in no way diminished by those who can't. Remember, your discernment cannot "save" anything or anyone. Discernment is, at best, only the illumination by which a person can make choices. God never takes the power of choice and responsibility from any person. God will not be a big scapegoat in the sky: "God made me do it." God lets us see what the choices and consequences are. The responsibility for discernment never releases a person or a group from the responsibility of choice.

The Motions of Discernment

In closing, I believe that discernment is not a sorting ability; rather it is a recognition and alignment task. To discern is to know God. To be so in union with God's nature and heart, that we feel as joined as the Old Testament sense of sexual knowing. The tender intimacy. The wondrous intercoupling. The release of abandonment, trust, vulnerability. The utter peace, contentment, smiles that saturate the being. The discerner is a lover, a lover who is ill at ease in any other space except God/Love/Reality/Life. All else falls short of the glory of God and is perceived for the shortfall it is.

The first motion of discernment is to come: to come with all one's inadequacies, insufficiencies, weakness, evil, blind spots, pain. To come to the Love, the Light. To there bathe in Mercy. To shed the heavy begrimed garments of condemnation, failure, control, alienation, brokenness. To splash in childlike abandon in Life. To abide in the eye of God's care and affection. To see *all* from this perspective. To view life and its intertwinings from the place of being met, loved, and wondrously cared for.

The second motion is to live in the sensitivity of a delicate radar that perceives the slightest, most subtle Godward blip. It is to see and affirm the movements of God in the universe. And from these affirmations of words and life, all Truth and non-truth takes its rightful course.

Appendix III

WRITTEN AND ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Working in Groups

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ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES

Organizations Promoting Diversity, Study Groups, and Conflict Resolution

Equity Institute is a national, nonprofit multicultural agency committed to reducing oppression and teaching appreciation and understanding of diversity. Equity Institute offers public workshops and training programs including Dismantling Racism, Dismantling Classism, Appreciating Diversity, Dismantling Sexism. For information, write to them at 6400 Hollis Street, Suite 15, Emeryville CA, 94608 or call (510) 658-4577.

The Study Circles Resource Center offers an information kit with in-depth information on what study circles are, detailed guidelines to assist in organizing, leading and participating in study circles, and curriculum guides for studying topics of interest to social change workers including health, economics, racism, and international security. They are located at Route 169, P.O. Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258; (203) 928-2616.

National Institute for Dispute Resolution, 1901 L Street, NW, Suite 600, Washington, D.C. 20036; (202) 466-4764. An organization promoting education about dispute resolution and its use in courts and educational institutions. NIDR can provide assistance in finding local dispute resolution services. (More than 400 community justice centers exist nationwide).

Organizations Promoting Support Groups For Members

The Impact Project is a nonprofit organization which organizes support groups for people with financial surplus (earned or inherited) who are seeking a more just and sustainable world. In addition, they offer individual counseling, workshops, a money workbook, and a quarterly newsletter ("More than Money"). Their work assists people to clarify their values around money, to take charge of their spending and investments, to deal better with money in their relationships, to create meaningful work, and to use their resources effectively to help make the world a better place. The Impact Project can be reached at 21 Linwood St., Arlington, MA 02174; (617) 648-0776. (Note: They are not a funding agency. Please do not contact them for referral to individual funders.)

Interhelp is an international network of people who share their deepest responses to world conditions that threaten human life and the earth. They help people within their own communities to move through feelings of isolation and hopelessness to empowerment. Interhelp offers community gatherings and training in Despair and Empowerment, Deep Ecology and personal support systems. Contact Interhelp at P.O. Box 86, Cambridge, MA 02140.

The Traprock Peace Center, a peace education center in Western Massachusetts, creates affinity groups for volunteers who assist the center. The groups foster a sense of mutual support while doing the work. For information contact the Traprock Peace Center, Woolman Hill, Keets Road, Deerfield, MA 01342; (413) 773-7507.