

Berkeley, California is full of interesting people and my seminary was no exception. Although Pacific School of Religion was founded by Congregational Missionaries, it has become an intentionally diverse school attracting people of all faiths from many corners of the world and many of them shattered any stereotypes I may have held about what “those” people were like. One of my favorite shattered stereotypes was my friend Carl. Carl was the first Quaker I had ever met in person. He had curly jet black hair, brown skin, and piercing blue eyes. He was raised in a Quaker household and wore clothes that seemed more suited for a farm than for urban California life. But Carl surprised me one day by pulling up to campus on a motor cycle. Instead of his wide brimmed hat he was wearing a sleek black helmet and on top of his denim overalls he was wearing a black motorcycle jacket. I knew in that moment that I not only needed to get to know Carl better but that I had made a lot of assumptions about what it meant to be a Quaker that were probably not based in fact.

I asked Carl if I could attend a Quaker meeting with him and a few weeks later I found myself sitting in a circle two rows deep with about 30 other people on Sunday morning in an elementary school meeting room where they gathered each week. Instead of singing hymns we were sitting in silence. I had done a little online research and talked to Carl so I would know what to expect. I learned that this was an unprogrammed meeting meaning that we gathered in silence without the services of a designated pastor. We were to sit in silence until we were moved by the spirit to speak. I learned that some meetings may go the full hour with not a single word being spoken and some meetings will be very talkative. But the talking is only meant to take place if you truly feel that it is something God is calling on you to say. It is not meant to be a conversation so once someone speaks, you wouldn't respond on what they said unless you felt compelled by God to do so.

We sat in silence for maybe 10 minutes. One person stood and spoke a sentence or two. Then more silence. A second person stood and spoke a few sentences. After maybe 20 minutes a woman came into the room and sat down on the opposite side of the circle as me. We sat in silence for a few more minutes and then she began to speak. Her children were students at the school and she was concerned about their welfare. She asked if there was someone she could talk to because she thought they needed some help. After hearing her comments I wondered if she had wandered into the Quaker meeting thinking it was a school meeting. But it was Sunday so that seemed strange. I let it go and sat in silence in the circle for a few minutes.

Then the woman broke the silence again. "I'd really like an answer." She said this time. "My kids need help and I don't know what to do." It was clear now that she had no idea she was sitting in a Quaker meeting and that their worship practice is silence. My inner voice was telling me to say something or to go over to her. But this was my first meeting. I was a guest, a visitor in this space. I didn't want to be rude to my hosts or embarrass my friend. So I sat there, hoping I wasn't the only one who realized she needed, at the very least to be told that this was not a school meeting. After a minute or so the woman stood up and left in a huff. She is visibly upset and frustrated. I felt deeply saddened but also not sure if I should have done anything differently. A few seconds later, my friend Carl stood up and walked out. More silence. After a minute or two Carl came back and took his seat again. More silence. Then Carl stood up. I don't remember his exact words but they were something to the effect of "What are we doing here? We are waiting for the spirit to speak to us, yet we can't recognize the spirit speaking to us through the flesh and blood of that woman who just left? She was clearly in need and we let our structure get in the way of actually ministering to her." It was a brief but powerful statement. We sat in silence for the rest of the meeting.

In that silence I prayed. I asked God to not let my fear or anxiety get in the way of helping people. I prayed that I might have more courage to do what is right even if I might sometimes look foolish or make some people upset. I prayed that my eyes might be more open to seeing those situations quickly and to hear God's guidance for how to respond. I prayed that prayer over and over for the rest of the meeting.

I have said before I don't know how prayer works. No one really does. But I noticed a change after that meeting. I began to notice a feeling in my body in those moments when I either needed to speak up for something important or when I needed to take an action that was a little outside my comfort zone in order to help someone. The feeling was new and a little hard to describe. It was like a welling up. Like my heart was being filled. It was different from feeling nervous or anxious but similar. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, reportedly felt God's presence and felt his heart "strangely warmed." I think this was something similar.

This feeling showed up in simple ways. Once I was sitting on an airplane as people were boarding and a woman who was coming down the aisle dropped her purse. A pill organizer popped open and her pills spilled all over the aisle. No one got up to help her. It was only a few seconds as I contemplated whether I should help or not before I felt that "strange warmth" and I got up and helped her hunt down all of the little pills she had dropped.

But the most intense example happened during a school break when I was back in Washington state visiting my parents. A transitional homeless encampment was being hosted by the Unitarian church down the road from our UCC church. Many of the residents of the camp did not have transportation and in order to get the bus, would have to walk the almost 4 miles each way to the bus station. Much of the busy road did not have sidewalks so it was a rare

occurrence to see pedestrians walking that route. During church one Sunday, an announcement was made that if we saw someone walking along Woodinville Duvall Road, that they were probably from the camp and it would be wonderful if we would consider offering them a ride.

As I drove home alone after church that day, I spotted a woman walking along the opposite side of the road. I turned into a parking lot to turn around and I contemplated if I should offer her a ride. Living in a large urban areas for most of my life, I was taught to never, *ever*, pick up hitchhikers or give rides to strangers. *Especially* as a woman alone in a car. Besides, I wanted to get home and giving her a ride was out of my way. So, I was torn. I paused and asked God what to do. Then that same feeling showed up and I felt almost compelled to put my fear aside and to offer help. I went back down the road and spotted the woman on the shoulder of the road. I pulled up next to her and asked if she was headed to the Unitarian Church. When she said yes, I offered her a ride. She was so thankful. After working an overnight shift in Seattle and taking three busses to get back to Woodinville, she said she was dreading the 90 minute walk back to the camp on sore feet, which in the car took us all of 7 minutes. I dropped her off and turn back toward home again.

Our text from Romans mentions the Spirit praying on our behalf in “sighs too deep for words.” I wonder if that’s what I was feeling in those moments: sighs too deep for words. In ancient Hebrew the word for spirit is the same as the word for breath. Ruah. As I mentioned at the beginning of worship, the scriptures connect the breath of God with our own aliveness—The writers of Genesis describe God blowing breath into us at creation and we continue to breathe all of creation in and out of our bodies constantly. We are intimately connected to God in ways that we cannot comprehend. I wonder how often our bodies are the way God communicates and we either ignore them or we miss them altogether

because we are too busy waiting for a different method of delivery. We expect something more tangible like a specific outcome we have prayed for. Maybe we miss these bodily messages from God because we don't take the time to slow down and listen. Over time that "strange warmth" I was feeling has become more and more subtle. At first I wondered if I wasn't getting those messages from God anymore. But I think over time I have just become more attuned to them. The message doesn't have to shout to be heard anymore. But I am taking this season of Lent as a time to intentionally listen for all the ways God speaks. I invite you to join me. To turn off some of the distractions and take time to breathe. To heighten our senses to the ways God might be showing up in our lives. And remembering that God is as close as our breath, a breath that connects us to all of creation. Amen.