



Deep Speaks to Deep: Cultivating Spiritual Discernment through the Quaker Clearness Committee

Valerie Brown

*I pin my hopes to quiet processes and small circles,
in which vital and transforming events take place.*

—Rufus Jones, *Quaker mystic*

This article explores the Quaker spiritual practice and process of the clearness committee, an individual path of spiritual discernment within community, and its implications for spiritual directors. It focuses on the structure and process of the clearness committee, while briefly examining how Quaker discernment may inform spiritual direction. (Structure refers to composition of the clearness committee, and process refers to the mechanics or elements—how the clearness committee is conducted.) The motivation for writing this article arose from offering retreats and workshops throughout the United States and in other countries in which I have introduced non-Quakers to the clearness committee. I observed the profound impact that the process of the clearness committee has had on both individuals and groups.

Even among Quakers, the clearness committee, a pathway of spiritual discernment, is used sparingly and traditionally for the purpose of exploring marriage “under the care” of a Quaker meeting and to determine suitability for membership in a Quaker meeting. Yet it holds promise of deep spiritual discernment, transformation, connectedness, and relational trust among Quakers and non-Quakers alike.

This article begins with my personal experience of the clearness committee as a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and as a retreat leader trained by the Center for Courage & Renewal (<http://www.couragerenewal.org>), which utilizes the clearness committee as a centerpiece practice. I turn to a brief history of the clearness committee to set a context for its use in spiritual direction, and then examine key elements of the clearness committee, using the Courage & Renewal® or Circle of Trust® Approach. I explore some key terms and then the circumstances when the clearness committee might be appropriate beyond its somewhat traditional limited

use among Friends. Finally, I conclude this article with a sample outline of an updated format and structure of the clearness committee based on its use within the Center for Courage & Renewal.

Throughout this article, I refer to the word *God*. For me as a Quaker and a Buddhist, God is a Spirit of Oneness, the Light or Seed within All Things; it is the energy of compassion, love, understanding, and peace. Also, periodically in this article, I share my personal reflections, questions, and insights in italicized *Deep Speaks to Deep Reflection* sections.

Deepening Light: My Experience of Quaker Clearness Committee

In 2005, I was married “under the care of” a Quaker meeting as a member of the Religious Society of Friends, in a 250-year-old stone and cedar Quaker meetinghouse in the bucolic setting of gently rolling hills and country farms of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, USA. In preparation for marriage, my then-to-be partner and I participated in the clearness committee to discern our readiness (spiritually, mentally, emotionally, financially, relationally, and the like) for this important step in our lives. The members of the meeting offered great care and a generous spirit that I appreciate even more today. However, it was during my experience with the clearness committee two years later, as I trained with the Center for Courage & Renewal, that I understood the profound beauty and power of this intimate spiritual practice.

At that time, I was training in a two-year national facilitator program at the Center for Courage & Renewal in Seattle, Washington, USA, with the Quaker philosopher and educator Parker J. Palmer, who is well known among contemporary spiritual circles and is the author of many books and articles. His work focuses on the soul demands of contemporary life; an example of this focus is in two of his books, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life* and *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. The center leads retreats and offers services that help people connect who they are with what they do. At the time I was facing a crisis of vocation. I



was transitioning, slowly and with many stops and starts, from a high-pressure and unsustainable career as a lawyer-lobbyist, representing educational institutions and nonprofits, to work that was unclear and undefined. I sensed that this training with the center was a critical element of reinventing my life and my work in the world.

This rigorous training, in a tiny, highly selective cohort that included extensive mentoring with Palmer and other leaders at the center, had a profound impact on my emerging sense of work as a retreat leader, leadership coach, writer, spiritual director, and Afro-Cuban woman.

My training in the clearness committee with the center was held at the wooded setting of the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan, USA, a place devoted to the study of love, compassion, and forgiveness. On the second night of my retreat, I gathered with Palmer and four other Courage & Renewal facilitators in training. This was my first opportunity to serve as a committee member on this Courage & Renewal-style clearness committee. As night approached we met in a tiny room with five Adirondack-style chairs in a spacious circle lit by a single white candle and one empty chair, a symbol of the role and importance of silence in this process. I took my place next to Palmer, as we sat together for more than two hours, sometimes in reverent silence, other times asking gently probing, open questions. Occasionally, the rhythm of the group felt like rough waves crashing on a deserted beach. At other times, our small group of five felt deeply entrained by spirit as the questions, building from one to the other, took the focus person (the person presenting the concern or dilemma) deeper and deeper into her story, her life, her soul. What emerged that night after the questions, after a time of “mirroring back” to the focus person, and after a period of “affirmations and celebrations” of the focus person, was an unforgettable sense of truthfulness and tenderness. An atmosphere of love, generosity, gratitude, and profound connectedness was visibly present in the room. We closed the committee as we began, sitting in silence, sensing a “mind of oneness.”

Deep Speaks to Deep Reflection

I have to confess that I entered into marriage for all the wrong reasons: I was so very tired of being alone. Like many people, I held onto the fairy-tale belief that I would magically fall in love, meet the “right” person, marry, and live

happily ever after. The truth was that most of my waking day was consumed with my work life, my career as a lawyer-lobbyist, representing educational institutions and nonprofits. I chose this career because I wanted to get as far away as I could from my early life as a child, which was filled with violence and poverty. And so, I did a lot of running. I left home at eighteen and ran from home to undergraduate school, and then to graduate school, and from there to law school, and on to the bar exams, and finally I ran to the so-called “dream job.” The only problem with the dream job was that it was killing my soul and spirit, leaving me time-bankrupt.

To deal with the pressure and stress of work, I became a closet mediator. I feared that if work colleagues learned about my spiritual life, I would not be taken seriously as meditation and mindfulness were not mainstream as they are today. I was consumed with being the hotshot lawyer. So I did a lot of hiding and a lot of running from myself. I hid and ran for so long that I did not really know who I was, what I stood for, what was meaningful in my life, how to share that with others, and most tragically, how to love truly and well.

I entered the clearness committee process in preparation for marriage thusly, carrying lots of unconscious baggage. I was unprepared for marriage, for intimacy, for relationship. Recalling that night with Parker and others, I realize that my unpreparedness for marriage was part of my personal journey toward reclaiming love as a part of my life. I had to recognize this truth before I could change it.

The clearness committee, at its core, is a door to growing in spiritual discernment, of which I knew very little. Discernment is the spiritual practice of recognizing and understanding God’s call in your life. It is a “precondition” to faithful action. It is an inner “faculty” that you cultivate over time that enables you to distinguish one choice from another, which supports an honest examination of your feelings and motivations. For Friends and for spiritual directors, it is like a plumb line that helps you know when to speak at a Quaker meeting and when to be silent, what job to take, how to spend your money, or how to use your leisure time. In discernment, you ask yourself: “Is this of God?” And then you listen.

Like spiritual direction, discernment is a practice of being attentive, being reflective, and being loving to determine “what is truly from God.” You call to mind



where God has shaped your life, where your feelings and emotions have been most engaged, and notice emerging patterns that might bring you closer to God.

As a lawyer-lobbyist, I was accustomed to “muscling” my way through life, by sheer willpower and grit. However, in discernment, I learned that you don’t “muscle” your way through, saying, “Give it to me straight and give it to me now.” It is not a technique or tool that you put in and pull out of a bag for convenient use. Instead, discernment arises from faithfulness, unfolding over time as you cultivate your own inner spiritual landscape and relationship with God. In other words, you purposefully and intentionally practice openness, attentiveness, forgiveness, and kindness of inward and outward life and relationships. A God-centered trust develops that unfolds within you and supports clarity and integrity of action. Integrity encourages a sense of wholeness, in which your values and actions align.

Deepening History of the Clearness Committee: An Overview

Spiritual discernment lies at the heart of Quaker spirituality and practice. It’s grounded in the central Quaker conviction of the availability to every person of the experience and guidance of God, immediate as well as mediated.

—Patricia Loring, from *Spiritual Discernment: The Context and Goals of Clearness Committees*

The Religious Society of Friends emerged as a spiritual movement more than 350 years ago in England during a period of religious upheaval as a people sought new ways to understand Christianity. Members of this emerging faith were drawn together under the charismatic leadership of George Fox and others who encouraged people to be guided by a direct encounter with the Spirit. These Quakers were seeking an authentic return to “primitive Christianity,” as practiced by the followers of Jesus in the first century (“FAQs about Quakers”).

Early Friends sought spiritual discernment “to be clear” or “clearness” about “leadings” or callings as an expression of their faith. Among modern Friends, the clearness committee developed over time as a way to support Friends in seeking clearness, offering a loving, supportive, and prayerful community when a person is facing a challenge or decision (Gwyn, 6–7). The role of the clearness com-

mittee is a vital component of spiritual discernment in community, in part because many Friends have no minister, no sacraments, no baptism, no Holy Communion, and no liturgy. Friends believe that these liturgical arrangements are best experienced inwardly. Quaker communities help to serve as a tester of the rightness of a person’s sense of Spirit, leading, and getting clear.

Early on, the Friends used the clearness committee to ascertain the appropriateness of marriage “under the care of” a Quaker meeting and to sound requests for membership. Even today, the clearness committee remains uncodified and flexible to allow it to adapt to a variety of uses and settings, including secular settings. When facing important life decisions, new employment, adoption, changing careers, and the like, Friends use the clearness committee as a tool of personal discernment. This small, ad hoc group of wise, caring, and supportive people mainly listen and ask open questions of the person holding the decision, the focus person. The decision remains with the focus person. In the case of marriage to be conducted *under the care of the Quaker meeting*, the aim of the clearness committee is to arrive at a shared sense about how to proceed.

The clearness committee idea has evolved. Originally, at the meeting, the role of the clearness committee with regard to marriage is to assure the couple that they are clear to marry—no other relationships are in place. Today, it serves as a support for the couple as a way to discern their preparedness to marry. That is a significant change over time. Similarly, in cases of questions of membership, clearness committee members might ask: Is the person a member somewhere else? In both cases, clearness has a role for the meeting and for the individual. Ultimately, those involved in the clearness committee, both the couple and the members of the committee, should feel that the decision to marry is wise and fulfilling not just for the couple but for the meeting to hold the celebration under its care. When clearness is reached, the Quaker meeting members commit to nurture and support the couple and may even contribute to the couples’ financial needs (“Committee for Clearness”).

The purpose of the clearness committee is to help a person (the focus person) with an important dilemma who is unclear about how to proceed. The committee helps the focus person by advising him or her to discern





the presence of God, clarify next steps, or consider new and unexplored options. It is not a time to offer the focus person unsolicited advice or to fix, save, or counsel the focus person, but rather to help uncover blind spots and reflect on unconsidered factors. Members of the committee are not there to pass judgment or to offer the group's wisdom—even if the members are very wise people. Instead, committee members are charged to listen first and foremost without prejudice or judgment and with an open heart and mind and to offer emotional support as the focus person seeks to find his or her own personal truth and the best course of action. The underlying assumption among Friends is that each person has *that of God* within and has an *inner teacher*—an inner source of wisdom.

In the twentieth century, and specifically in the 1960s, Young Friends in North America (YFNA, young adult Friends) turned to the clearness committee for discernment on issues that were “too personal or not sufficiently seasoned to bring under the weight of the meeting for business.” Over time, Quakers “assimilated into the wider society with its high value on privatism and individualism.” Consequently, issues that formerly might have been of concern for the meeting community became regarded as private. While this privacy may not be all bad, its downside was that it deprived individuals of community guidance and support especially in difficult times. As a result, in the 1970s, these young Friends linked to the Movement for a New Society (MNS) and explored the use of the clearness committee as a secular process of decision-making. MNS, cofounded by activists Lawrence Scott, George Lakey, Bill Moyer, George Willoughby, and Lillian Willoughby, was a network of social activists that was committed to the principles of nonviolence. It coined the term *focus person* to describe the person in the clearness committee who presents the question, concern, or dilemma to the committee (Loring 1992, 20–21).

As it has evolved, the clearness committee “offers a way back into community support and guidance at criti-

cal times in peoples’ lives.” The clearness committee not only functions as an instrument of discernment, it “helps recover the communal dimension of the spiritual life in relationships, in the vitality and authority that come of profound union in and commitment to God” (Loring 1992, 20–21).

While the clearness committee can be used for secular purposes, for Friends it is an individual and communal process of spiritual discernment and support, an instrument to understand the movement of God in a person's life. “We pray, listen, evaluate, sift through possibilities, and then we act.... Discernment is not finished when we make a decision.” There may be no clear-cut answer; instead it may lead you to deeper questions, deeper exploration as you attempt to determine where God is leading you. Your thoughts, emotions, and reactions are all useful in weighing choices that align with Spirit-led ways (Blythe, 17).

For Friends, it is a lifelong and perhaps daily practice to learn how to discern whether a “leading,” prompting, or nudging is from God. It takes

disciplined reflection to know the difference between a sense of leading and “your own contributions of thought and imagination” (Drayton and Taber, 95).

Deep Speaks to Deep Reflection

I became a lawyer before I knew who I was. I am grateful for the decision to go into this field of work because it has enabled me to make great legislative achievements and to help many people, while having a secure income. However, there was a great price: emotionally, relationally, spiritually, and physically.

I started exploring a shift in career while I was still fully engaged in my legal career. I decided to enroll in a part-time graduate course at night in holistic spirituality at Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia. For the first few weeks of the semester, I noticed that I was very short tempered, and as the days went on, I was feeling boiling-hot mad. One day, a fellow student stopped me just outside a classroom to ask a

*For Friends, it is a lifelong
and perhaps daily practice
to learn how to discern
whether a “leading,”
prompting, or nudging is
from God.*



harmless question, something like directions to a class, and I flew into a rage. After off-loading on her, and then apologizing, I decided to “sit down with myself” to figure out what exactly was happening with me. As I began to reflect on my motives to study spirituality, forgiveness and reconciliation, and Christology, I realized that I was moving into a vast uncharted and unknown territory of my soul and aligning my life to something deeper. In enrolling in this program at Chestnut Hill College, I was learning, perhaps for the first time, to trust the Truth within me, to allow myself to be an instrument of God’s will. Previously, I believed that if I went to law school and passed the bar exam, a good job would probably be waiting for me somewhere. At Chestnut Hill, I was not following an outward trajectory, but rather an inward motion, an imperative that I could hardly articulate to myself.

Quakers adhere to the belief in the possibility of direct, mediated, and unmediated communion with the Divine, the Light Within, and a commitment to living lives that outwardly attest to this inward experience. The Light or the Seed Within is one of many terms to designate the source and inner certainty of Quaker faith—a faith grounded in experience. Light and Seed refer to the reality for Friends of God’s presence within us for our own healing and wholeness and for the healing and wholeness of others and the world. Seed, for Friends, refers to being and willing, while Light refers to knowing and doing (Gwyn, xxv). The seed image is an apt metaphor for spiritual work. Imagine a tiny seed, lying silent but stirring against its hard shell to reach into growth when the conditions are right: the right soil, right temperature, right light, and right amount of water. The conditions are present to nurture the seed’s growth from the darkness of the soil into the light. Like the seed, we, as spiritual directors, create the conditions to quiet ourselves, our inner voice, and outer busyness to open when conditions support our growth.

Patricia Loring, a Quaker writer known for her series on spiritual discernment, describes discernment as “a gift from God, not a personal achievement” (Loring 1992, 3). Part of the discernment process is recognizing when it is time to “wait and wait again” or to consider “whether the leading is being withdrawn” (Drayton and Taber, 98). Sometimes discernment may be a sense of realization without the need for any specific action. In this case,

your understanding or point of view may have shifted and that may be enough (97).

For spiritual directors, it is important to recognize and understand how your expectations, hopes, assumptions, impulses, underlying family patterns, and the like shape your sense of a leading. The “discipline of faithfulness frees us from the deep attachment to the outcomes of our leadings and allowing ourselves to be so attached can itself make us less sensitive to guidance” (Drayton and Taber, 98). Therefore, the practice begins by choosing to pay attention to your experience—your experience of your own inner life and your environment. When you do this, you notice a mixture of light and dark, ideas and feelings, and things that give you joy and things that sadden you. It is a rich tapestry, and it grows more complex the more you let it register in your awareness. Your thoughts and feelings, your desires, your attachments, your fears, and your response to people, places, and what is happening around you are all moments in which we create a unique relationship with Truth.

“Deep Calling under Deep”: Understanding Key Words of the Clearness Committee

Early Friends described the inward motion of discernment of the Spirit in a variety of ways. These key words may be particularly relevant for spiritual directors exploring the clearness committee. These key words point to a way of being for spiritual directors that not only support connection and deep listening but also support a deeper relationship with God that in turn creates an atmosphere of love, trust, and understanding.

Waiting

Waiting describes a “living experience” that not only refers to the passage of time but also a “spiritual practice or spiritual state” (Drayton and Taber, 18) of receptive alertness and loving attention. Waiting, as used among Friends, is both “passive/receptive and active/responsive” (18). It is nurtured state in which you cultivate focus while letting go of distractions. It reminds me of the words of the influential American theologian Howard Thurman, who said that waiting is not inactivity. In his book *Meditations of the Heart*, Thurman articulates the spiritual quality of waiting in this passage on centering:



We look at ourselves in this waiting moment—the kinds of people we are.

The questions persist: what are we doing with our lives?

What are the motives that order our day?

What is the end in our doings?

Where are we trying to go?

Where do we put the emphasis and where are our values focused?

For what end do we make sacrifices?

Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?

What do I hate most in life and to what am I true?

Over and over the questions beat in the waiting moment.

As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes of our turbulence, there is a sound of another kind—
A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.... (Thurman, 28–29)

Watchful

Watchfulness refers to a quality of “inward attention on our condition, not far from the threshold of prayer” that fosters sensitivity to the “little hints and motions of the Spirit” (Drayton and Taber, 22). Both waiting and watchfulness are hallmarks of spiritual direction. Through watchfulness and waiting, we can pause long enough to examine, to reflect on our life choices toward meaningful direction. Both support a daily deepening of a sense of God’s work in the world and in us.

A “Gathered” Relationship

“Gathered” is a term Friends use to describe the quality of being fully present to the best of our ability and truly listening while waiting silently with the expectation that God’s presence can be discerned. It is this process of “inward recollection” (Gwyn, 81) that forms the basis for worshipful presence and supporting the clearness endeavor.

From a Quaker perspective, to be gathered inwardly is to be centered with mind oriented to the power of Spirit, and it is an essential component of spiritual direction. When a clearness committee is gathered, it is centered, where “various individuals and their diverse thoughts feel that they are part of one body, drawn together by Christ” (Drayton and Taber, 134).

In the section that follows, I address the key elements of the clearness committee; circumstances when it might be appropriate to use the clearness committee; and how the spiritual practices embedded in the clearness committee, such as deep listening, expectant waiting, and inward attentiveness, support discernment. I conclude with a revised format of the clearness committee based on the work of Parker J. Palmer and the Center for Courage & Renewal.

As we serve as spiritual companions with others, we are drawn into a deeper mystery of the human heart and soul. We may be called to sit with another in daunting loss and grief, confusion, or at pivotal moments of change. For spiritual directors, these moments and many more serve as an opportunity to practice the principles of the clearness committee.

Deepening Principles: Key Elements of Clearness Committee

Adapted from: Parker J. Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness, Jossey-Bass, 2004; Patricia Loring, Spiritual Discernment, Pendle Hill, 1992; and Parker J. Palmer, “The Clearness Committee: A Communal Approach to Discernment”

Every person has an “inner teacher,” an inner source of wisdom

The central tenet of the clearness committee is this conviction:

Each person has an inner teacher, a source of wisdom within that offers guidance to address our problems. There are no external authorities on life’s deepest issues, no clergy or therapists or scholars; there is only the authority that lies within each of us waiting to be heard. But that inner voice can often be hard to hear because of various kinds of inward and outward interference. The function of the clearness committee is not to give advice or “fix” people from the outside in but rather to help people remove the interference so that they can discover their own wisdom from the inside out. If we do not believe in the reality of inner wisdom, the clearness committee can become an opportunity for manipulation. But if we respect the power of the inner teacher, the clearness committee can be a remarkable way to help someone name and



Sample Clearness Committee Format
Based on the Work of Parker J. Palmer and the Center for Courage & Renewal

“The combination of silence and open questions got me out of my well-rehearsed scripts that allowed me to say something fresh and new. I felt privileged at being heard so deeply.”—Clearness committee participant

The sample clearness committee below is adapted from the work of the Center and Parker Palmer. As a Courage & Renewal facilitator, I received extensive training in preparing groups for the clearness committee and in leading groups through the clearness committee process using this model. I devote several hours to preparing group participants to be members of a clearness committee and in preparing the focus person, as well as debriefing the clearness committee process. During the debriefing, I remind participants of the guideline on double confidentiality and invite comments from both focus persons and clearness committee members about their experience, cautioning not to divulge the content of what was said during the committee. The quote that opens this section is representative of what many people say after they have experienced the clearness committee.

Preparation:

- ◆ Form groups of four to five
- ◆ Select a focus person and timekeeper
- ◆ Select a quiet, private place
- ◆ Arrange the place according to the focus person’s specifications
- ◆ Have paper and pens ready for committee members

Focus Person Presents Opening Statement (fifteen minutes)

The focus person breaks the silence when he is ready to begin. The focus person describes his issue, concern, or dilemma and signals to the committee when he is ready for questions. The focus person may use all or part of the first fifteen minutes to present an opening statement. The timekeeper begins keeping track of time at this point for ninety minutes of open questions

once the focus person indicates he is ready.

Committee Members Present Open Questions to the Focus Person (ninety minutes)

Committee members ask questions grounded in deep listening. Listen for what is said and unsaid. Listen as an act of love and generosity. Listen with your full awareness to the best of your ability. Ask brief, open-ended questions and take notes. Note taking is for the focus person and can be helpful in the mirroring process; the purpose of notes is to try to recount the focus person’s journey. It is not a “court record” and if taking literal notes is distracting, do not take them. The notes will be given to the focus person at the conclusion of the clearness committee process. Committee members hold the focus person tenderly and allow silence to be a member of the group. Allow silence to do the “heavy lifting.”

Mirroring or More Questions? (ten minutes)

The timekeeper asks the focus person whether she wants the committee members to “mirror” back what they have heard and observed or to continue asking open questions. Mirroring involves reading critical passages from the committee member’s notes or observing something about the focus person when he is speaking. (For instance, “When you spoke about your son’s reaction, you shifted forward and a huge smile lit up your face.”) Mirroring is not about offering assessments based on the committee member’s observations, intuition, or beliefs.

Affirmations and Celebrations of the Focus Person (five minutes)

Committee members express their sincere gratitude and appreciation for the focus person and then give the focus person the clearness committee notes. The focus person may make a concluding statement of appreciation. As a committee, allow for a time of silence together to experience a sense of what has emerged from the process. This ends the clearness committee.

Adhere to the time limits, and remember the guideline of double confidentiality.



claim his or her deepest truth (Palmer, “The Clearness Committee”).

The clearness committee is not intended to “fix” the focus person, so there should be no sense of letdown if the focus person does not have his or her problems “solved” when the process ends. *A good clearness process does not end*—it keeps working within the focus person long after the clearness committee is over. The rest of us need simply to keep “holding that person in the Light,” trusting the wisdom of his or her inner teacher (Palmer, “The Clearness Committee”).

Double confidentiality

The clearness committee process is totally confidential, creating an emotionally safe space. When the process is over, committee members will not speak with each other or with others about what happened—and they will not speak with the focus person about the issue unless she requests a conversation (Palmer, “The Clearness Committee”).

Only open, honest questions are permitted, not advice giving or attempting to “fix” the person or the “problem”

Questions should be “authentic, challenging, loving, open so that the focus person can discover his or her own agenda without being burdened by the agenda of committee members” (Loring 1992, 23). Questions to satisfy a committee member’s own curiosity should not be asked, but instead should help the focus person clarify his or her inner truth. Questions such as “Have you considered therapy?” or “Have you read XXX book to help you with this ‘problem’” are obvious examples of leading, closed-ended questions in the nature of advice giving or problem solving. Learning to ask an open-ended question may sound simple but it is not easy, in part, because we live in a quick-fix, answer-oriented society. Open questions are short, concise, and to the point. They avoid projections or analysis of the situation presented. They help move the focus person to a new frontier, a new insight, a new way of thinking about a dilemma.

“For many well-intentioned people, refraining from advice or commentary is an excruciatingly difficult discipline” because it “violates ordinary social use of verbal

interchange as an occasion to display oneself and assertion of one’s ideas” and because “our culture equates helping people with giving them something: material aid, ideas, or a plan of action. If we haven’t ‘given’ something to the other person, we tend to feel we haven’t really helped them” (Loring 1992, 23). Committee members may ask open questions only and may not make statements or offer suggestions. To this extent, the clearness committee is highly countercultural.

The appropriate use of silence to punctuate questions and gently open the process is also a challenging practice. For some, silence may be uncomfortable. It may trigger old childhood baggage about “children being seen but not heard.” For others, speech may be uncomfortable. However, silence should be a valued member of the committee. The clearness committee members should allow silence to flow “gracefully around questions and answers,” “to allow the questions and answers to sink into us in the silence,” taking a posture of “attentive, prayerful listening” (Loring 1992, 25). This means that the pacing of questioning and answering should be spacious, relaxed, and gentle. Silence does not mean that nothing is happening.

Allow for deep listening

The Quaker leader Douglas V. Steere said, “To listen another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another.” Steere describes a depth of the intensity of presence that is the hallmark of the clearness committee and of spiritual direction. Committee members maintain attentiveness, listening deeply and letting go of preparedness, analysis, and intellect, to sink into the silence, to sink into the question and answer, and to wait on whatever will arise. This is a practice of quieting the mind and centering the body, which is so critical to spiritual direction.

Too often we are unprepared to listen. We listen for what we expect the other person to say, for what we hope the person will say, or for what we want the person to say. The clearness committee is not a set of techniques, “coaching or cheerleading” the focus person, or a matter of knowing the right etiquette. Rather, there is an inward quality—an inward attentiveness of being fully present—gathered for a common purpose to seek God’s



will through waiting, listening, and our compassionate support and understanding.

Deepening Circumstances: When to Use the Clearness Committee

My friend and colleague, poet Caryl Ann Casbon, is right: there are times in our life when we want, and maybe need, the support of others as we navigate life. Too often, at precisely these times, the inclination, especially in the American “rugged individualist” culture, is to go it alone. As Parker Palmer has said, at critical times we “privatize” matters of the heart, trying to think our way out of a box. These can be stressful times when our plans may have gone awry—very awry—and we find ourselves in an in-between space, toggling back and forth in decision. Doubt reigns.

The clearness committee is ideal for these situations, and in this section, I offer examples of circumstances when this approach may offer real hope.

1. Questions about aligning “soul and role”; questions of calling or vocation

Casbon says: “The question so often asked of college seniors, ‘What are you going to do with your life?’ is not a query we answer once. As a result of growth and further education, promotions, obsolescence, or emergence of untapped inner gifts, etc., at any time we can find ourselves asking the question, ‘What am I here to do, and am I in the right place to accomplish my vocation, to follow my calling?’ On a very deep level, we understand our ‘aliveness’ depends on the answer to this, and when we are ‘off-call’ we can create problems for ourselves and for those we work and live with.”

2. Questions of life meaning and purpose

How do you plan to live this amazing and priceless life that you are given? What is most meaningful? Are you following your true purpose or life’s calling?

Consider Alice, a sixty-six-year-old former nurse. She wonders: “What’s next? I’m retired, and I’m a little bored. I know a lot, have done lots of different kinds of training, and would still like to use these skills. And continue to maintain and sharpen my personal discernment skills, but for what purpose, what direction?”

Questions of life meaning and purpose are both deeply

personal and yet paradoxically universal. Each of us, at some point in our lives, may turn to these big, existential questions of our life meaning and purpose. Again, these are not questions we ask once. This is not a destination, but instead a journey of becoming who we are meant to be.

Closing

The clearness committee is transformational and foundational for my work in the world as a spiritual director, leadership coach, writer, and retreat leader. It may offer a new vehicle for spiritual directors to nurture themselves and to offer the practice of discernment with others. I appreciate the committee’s emphasis on allowing “way to open” and also allowing not knowing. I also appreciate the use of silence and speech, the care and love expressed by committee members, and the edgy place of not knowing. The gathered community is an unstoppable power; it unites us. The human story is paradoxical: it is about small intimate gestures of small circles of people, speaking and listening deeply, and the largeness of love. The clearness committee is, at its heart, about the mystery of personhood and of God’s call in our lives. These are intertwined dynamics through which we become fully human. ■

References

- Blythe, Teresa A. *50 Ways to Pray: Practices from Many Traditions and Times*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006.
- Casbon, Caryl Ann. *Changes and Challenges: Framing Questions for the Clearness Committee Process* (handout). Center for Courage & Renewal. Accessed September 4, 2017. <http://www.couragerenewal.org/>.
- “Committees for Clearness.” Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends. Accessed September 4, 2017. <http://www.pym.org/faith-and-practice/friends-beliefs-and-practices/committees-for-clearness/>.
- Drayton, Brian, and William P. Taber Jr. *A Language for the Inward Landscape: Spiritual Wisdom from the Quaker Movement*. Philadelphia: Tract Association of Friends, 2015.
- “FAQs about Quakers.” Friends General Conference. Accessed September 4, 2017. <https://www.fgcquaker.org/explore/faqs-about-quakers>.



TRADITION AND LEGACIES

Gwyn, Douglas. *A Sustainable Life: Quaker Life and Practice in the Renewal of Creation*. Philadelphia: FGC/QuakerPress, 2014.

Loring, Patricia. *Listening Spirituality, Volume II: Corporate Spiritual Practice among Friends*. Bethesda, MD: Bethesda Friends Meeting, 1999.

———. *Spiritual Discernment: The Context and Goals of Clearness Committees*. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1992.

Palmer, Parker J. “The Clearness Committee: A Communal Approach to Discernment,” handout for training Courage & Renewal Facilitators, published by the Center for Courage & Renewal. Accessed September 4, 2017. <http://www.couragerenewal.org/clearnesscommittee/>. www.couragerenewal.org.

———. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

Steere, Douglas V. *On Listening to Another*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955.

Thurman, Howard. *Meditations of the Heart*. New York: Harper & Row, 1953.

Hafez 448

(14th C, Shiraz, Iran)

Spring. Its first rose animates all, shatters penitence as a stone thrown into the pool. Those soft petals pull the black taproot from this heart.

Morning stirs. The rosebud breaks out of itself: splits its green shirt and, bulging with love, opens.

Heart: learn from the rose’s dewy diadem. Be clear as that water. Grow as the cypress by pasture, in upright freedom.

The Bride is exactly this rosebud. Those eyes are jewels of dew. In that wide smile, I dissolve myself—as faith into heart must do.

Who doesn’t grieve for their rose? That screech of fraught bulbul, the shrill from birds of a thousand elegies, echoes in every eyeball.

True—spring winds may bring a burnt smell; but agitations enliven the petal. See how breezes jostle hyacinth hair on the nape of jasmine.

So, Reader, follow the melody of the holy minstrel, the harmony of the elder. Time has only one song, one story: it disappears, a drop of water, in purest Wine. ■

Mario Petrucci





I plan to offer this book to spiritual directees as a guide to what may be resonating deeply within individual souls. Even if the somewhat opaque concepts of unfamiliar spiritual traditions are not fully understood, I believe the mind will gain valuable insights from knowing they exist. Most importantly, the soul will find nourishment in the deep waters that interfaith spirituality so lavishly provides. ■

Donna Erickson Couch, MA, is the director of faith formation at Saint Edward the Confessor Catholic Church in Dana Point, California, USA. A spiritual director, she also has many years of experience as a retreat guide, master catechist, and college professor. She is the author of Together but Alone: When God Means Something Different to Your Spouse. Contact her at dcouch@stedward.com.

Coming to Light: Cultivating Spiritual Discernment through the Quaker Clearness Committee

by Valerie Brown

Pendle Hill Pamphlet #446

Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 2017

34 pages, USD\$7.00

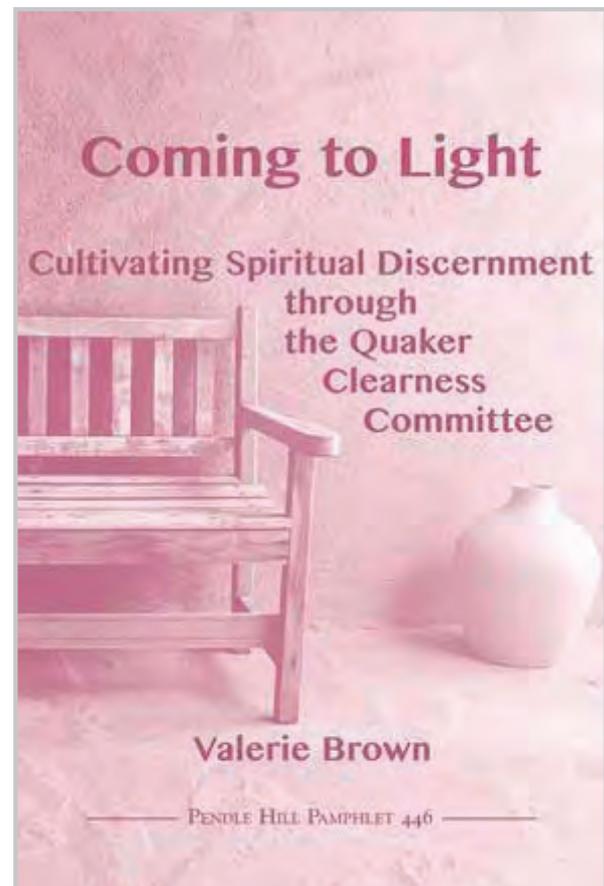
Reviewed by Karen L. Erlichman

Spiritual companions offer a holy container in which people can listen to the voice of inner wisdom, sometimes called God, the inner teacher, or the true self, as they discern the questions and challenges in their lives. Discernment practice can happen in one-on-one spiritual direction, in groups, or on retreat. Quaker retreat and learning community Pendle Hill in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, published a pamphlet called *Coming to Light: Cultivating Spiritual Discernment through the Quaker Clearness Committee*, written by Valerie Brown, an international retreat leader, writer, leadership coach, mindfulness practitioner, and yoga teacher. The title of this pamphlet is truly auspicious, as discernment in a clearness committee is a process of sitting in a sacred circle as the movement of God is illuminated in the life of the person.

Brown’s pamphlet is part of Pendle Hill’s ongoing series of pamphlets addressing a wide range of spiritual and political topics of interest. Brown gives a succinct description of the traditional Quaker practice of clearness committees, followed by her own personal

experience with this practice, “first as a member of the Religious Society of Friends and then as a retreat leader at the Center for Courage and Renewal, which uses the clearness committee as the center of its practice” (2). She describes her experience of the clearness committees with the Center for Courage and Renewal as follows: “We felt an unforgettable sense of truthfulness and tenderness. An atmosphere of love, generosity, gratitude and profound connectedness was tangibly present in the room” (4).

Brown’s voice as a writer is warm, openhearted, and trustworthy, even in this little thirty-four-page booklet. The thread of her own faith journey is woven throughout the six sections of the pamphlet, in which she describes the history of the clearness committee and its roots in the early years of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), as well as key components of the practice itself. These components include waiting, watchfulness, gathered, and feel/feeling (12–13). Brown’s definition of discernment beautifully captures



this sacred practice that is a cornerstone of spiritual direction: “Discernment is the practice of being attentive, being reflective, and being loving in order to determine what is truly from God” (5). Clearness committees create a sacred space for discernment using silence and deep listening, receptive patience, spaciousness, and a trustworthy container in which the person can truly hear that inner voice.

Brown offers suggestions about when to use clearness committees, such as exploring questions of calling and vocation, life’s meaning and purpose, forgiveness and reconciliation, aging and life transitions, and work-life balance and self-care. She includes a sample format and outline, as well as an appendix with useful complementary materials from the work of the Center for Courage and Renewal.

Coming to Light is an inspiring, informative resource for soul care practitioners who hold sacred space for discernment of all kinds. Seekers will also find useful wisdom when Brown’s sharing her personal faith journey through the lens of the clearness committee. ■

Karen Erlichman, DMin, LCSW, is a psychotherapist, spiritual director, supervisor, and mentor in San Francisco, California, USA. She is a founding codirector of Practistry and a core faculty mentor in the Morei Derekh Jewish Spiritual Direction Training Program. Karen was prepared as a facilitator by Parker Palmer and the Center for Courage & Renewal. E-mail her at Karen@KarenErlichman.com.

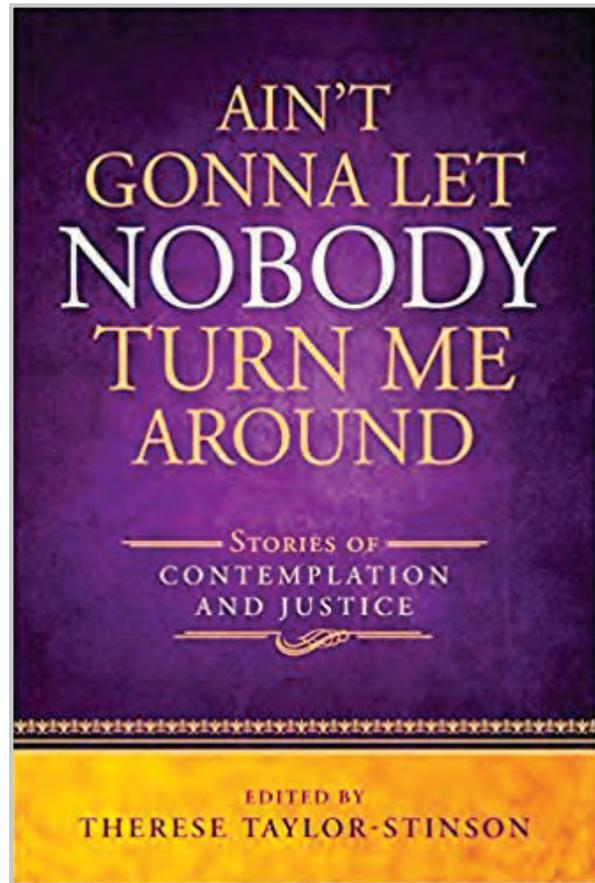
Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: Stories of Contemplation and Justice

edited by **Therese Taylor-Stinson**

New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2017
192 pages; CAD\$29.83, GBP£16.00, USD\$24.00

Reviewed by Karen L. Erlichman

In the current global political climate, many people yearn for resources to nourish the spirit of sacred activism and social justice, especially wisdom stories and faith testimonies from people of color. This new anthology, edited by Spiritual Directors International member Therese Taylor-Stinson, *Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: Stories of Contemplation and*



Justice, meets this longing with a feast for the spirit that supports God’s call for the healing and repair of our broken world.

In the first chapter, spiritual director and American Baptist minister Rev. Ineda Adesanya writes, “I am a practical theologian. This means that I want to see theology in practice, in action! It is one thing to talk about good news, and another to be and do good news. This is reflective of my conviction that spirituality and justice go hand-in-hand” (8).

In her chapter on compassion, Taylor-Stinson lifts up the definitions of this word from several different religious sources, shining a floodlight on the ways our world has lost touch with the depth and movement of God in the human experience of compassion. In her chapter, “Breathe on Me, Lord; I Can’t Breathe,” Rosalie Norman-McNaney seamlessly weaves together spiritual teachings about breath and contemplative breathing practices with the brutal racist killings of black people in the United States, literally snuffing