

Welcoming Quaker Children into Prayer and Worship: Introduction and Overview

Children are fully spiritual beings. They often see and sense the sacred in everyday life more readily than adults do! If we listen to them carefully and bring this awareness to their art projects and other forms of expression, we may detect a transcendent quality to their experiences. Lack of a sophisticated vocabulary can obscure this reality but if we listen carefully, we can often perceive evidence of early encounters with Spirit. Looking through a less complicated and less cluttered life lens, children seem to have more immediate encounters with the Divine Presence and they receive stirrings of the heart at face value. All of this makes childhood the perfect time to begin sharing about prayer and worship.

Like any Friend, children benefit from a guide along the path, occasions to intentionally hone their skills at listening for God, and a vocabulary that can shape, hold, and communicate their experiences. There's no substitute for matter-of-fact, ongoing, low-voltage sharings of a parent's or a First Day School teacher's faith journey. There's power in simple conversations about gratitude, love changing lives, the feelings that accompany leadings, coming to clearness on what is the right thing to do, and other descriptions of our inner experience. These chats validate a child's first steps on his or her spiritual journey and signal that reflective, faith-disclosing conversations are valued and held tenderly. The words, a vocabulary of Quaker faith, offer a framework to organize thought about these inner happenings and perhaps even help gel distinct memories of them.

There are lots of different ways to pray. And it is good to try out different ways and see what seems to make the connection with the Divine Presence clearer and more alive for you. Each one of us is the expert about how this listening or opening ourselves to the Light is going. There are lots of words to use for God or Spirit or the Inner Guide or Light. If one word feels uncomfortable or distracts you in some way and you find all that you are doing is thinking about what is making you uncomfortable, try out using another word! The words aren't the important part, the experience is.

To welcome Quaker children into the realm of prayer, I have deconstructed some of the basic components of a prayer practice and crafted hands-on, hearts-on activities to let us play our way into a familiarity and comfort with listening in the Light. I've included ways to help us:

- stop and rest from our busy lives,
- focus on one idea,
- hold people in the light,
- sense the Divine Presence,
- experience prayer with our whole body,
- engage in worship sharing with children,
- discern if leadings are coming from the Light or our egos, and
- make prayer a part of our daily life.

On my Quaker journey, I have come to believe that:

Prayer is for everyone.

Prayer is for any moment, situation, or mood.

We get better at Listening for God, the more we do it.

Prayer changes us; it opens our hearts and our imaginations toward more loving ways of living.

I'd love to hear about your adventures on the Quaker journey! Write to me at recoord@neym.org.

Beth Collea
Religious Education Coordinator,
New England Yearly Meeting
January 2012

Learning to Stop

Stopping is, ironically, the first step in starting to quiet ourselves, center, and get ready to pray or listen in the Light. Modern life, even for children, makes this a challenge! It's almost countercultural to not be busy all the time rolling forward from one important activity to another. We need to raise up the value of stopping regularly to catch our breath and get our bearings so that we are living lives in tune with our deepest values and becoming the kind of people that we feel led to be.

Mandala coloring is amazingly helpful in making this transition from "full steam ahead" to stillness and prayer. I especially like Kids' Seasonal Mandalas by Sterling Publishing Company. Mandalas are available free on-line, too, http://www.hellokids.com/c_3785/coloring/mandalas-gallery-coloring-pages/mandala-coloring-pages-beginning-level/round-mandala-coloring-page

I have used mandalas in my First Day School classroom. They became a cherished and expected opening to each class. For children with difficulty maintaining focused attention, I have found that coloring mandalas even while listening to a story increased their engagement and ability to follow the story. I've heard of adults taking up a daily practice of mandala coloring to reduce their job-related stress.

At home you might want to try 10 or 15 minutes of mandala coloring before dinner to settle and calm children who have been tense over homework, the demands of activities, or upset by the events of the day. If you set up a space to encourage centering and listening in the Light, you might want to include a supply of mandalas and crayons or markers so that children can use this strategy when they feel they want to step away from their fast-paced lives.

A Tibetan Prayer Bowl or any bell or chime that rings and then fades away slowly can function as a reminder to reconnect with the present moment and then return to your activities more mindfully. The more practice we have at stopping and centering ourselves, the more easily we can return to that inner stillness whenever we want to experience it again. You can select something as a simple reminder. Even using a red traffic light as a prompt to breath and quiet yourself inwardly can work.

Peaceful Piggy Meditation by Kerry Lee MacLean is a wonderful book to introduce centering to children. Even adults will love this book. At the end of the story is a "Mind-in-a-Jar" activity which is one of the best concrete illustrations of coming to greater clearness through becoming still that I have ever seen. Your child or your class might want to make a Mind-in-a-Jar to keep in their spiritual corner at home to remind them of how effective some quiet and stillness can be.

Beth Collea
RE Coordinator, NEYM

Learning to Reflect

The Examen

This spiritual discipline was originated by Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, and can be nicely adapted to family life. Loyola recommended that we ask what brought us "consolation" or "desolation" each day. At home, rephrase that as:

"For what moment today was I most grateful?"

And "For what moment today was I least grateful?"

With young children, you could begin with

"What was your favorite and least favorite part of the day."

It's great if you can ask this at the same time each day. Suppertime or bedtime is especially good for reflection. Don't count out carpool time as a hidden reservoir of time in which to reflect on the work of Light in your lives. You might want to phrase it as "Where did you see kindness at work in your day?" "Where could more kindness have been needed?"

For more on using the Examen, see [Sleeping With Bread, Holding What Gives Us Life](#) by Dennis Linn et al 1995.

Make a Gratitude Chain

Cut up paper strips about 1" by 6." On each one have a family member write one thing or person or experience for which they are grateful. Clue the strips into circles and make an interlocking Chain of Thanks. Hang it up as a reminder for a week or more.

Naming What's Special about Someone

(From Marella Averill, Winthrop Center Friends Church.)

Cut out leaf shapes and have children in your family or First Day School class name what they think is special about someone else. Parents should jump in and help name gifts. The modeling helps children get into the swing of naming gifts. It also underscores that we all find it helpful to work intentionally on our spiritual lives. Hang up the decorated leaves and celebrate each other!

Beth Collea, RE Coordinator, NEYM

Focusing on One Idea

A Munchkin Meditation & Holding People in the Light

This exercise helps us focus on just one thought at a time.

Print a copy of a simple finger labyrinth. This link will offer one possibility.

<http://www.lessons4living.com/Finger%20Labyrinth.PDF>

Place a donut hole in the middle. (You could also use a Clementine section or other healthier snack.) Have the class trace the path with their finger slowly toward the donut hole all the while thinking about how much they want the donut hole and how hungry they feel.

FOCUS!

SLOWLY SAVOR THE DONUT HOLE, yum, yum, yum.....

Now retrace the path outward holding the thought of GRATITUDE all the way back to the entrance. Do this a couple of times.

Now, try it without a donut hole. This time focus on one person. Surround that person with love and warmth and light in your mind and heart.

If other thoughts creep in, just brush them aside. If you are really distracted, pretend there is a large bookcase behind you and put the thought gently on one of the shelves and reassure it that you will come back to think about it later.

Focusing our minds or even emptying our minds is a skill. It is one of the foundations of prayer. We need to practice holding others in the light and we need to practice listening for the spirit.

Continue this exercise with the next handout, Practicing Prayer: Holding Someone in the Light.

Two books that are great to use with this lesson are Grandad's Prayers of the Earth by Douglas Wood or Peaceful Piggy Meditation by Kerry Lee MacLean.

Beth Collea, RE Coordinator NEYM
recoord@neym.org

**Practicing Prayer:
Holding Someone in the Light**

The First Day School is exploring the experience of holding someone in the Light. Above is the picture or name of a Friend facing a health problem or at a hard time in life. Please hang this up at home to remind you and your family to hold this Friend in the Light.

- Be still and quiet
- Think about your person and imagine wrapping them up in love.
- Now imagine wrapping them up in healing.
- Think about the Light within you connecting with the Light within him or her and bringing comfort and company.

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Worship Sharing—

a stepping stone into Meeting for Worship

Start with Silence

Focus on one question.

Use an I statement—say how it is for you—
speak about your own experience

Take Turns—each person gets to speak once before
anyone speaks for a second time
(You don't have to speak if you don't
have anything to offer right then)

Leave some silence between each speaker

Listen respectfully—Don't comment on someone else's sharing

End with Silence

Prayer Changes Us

Our encounters with the Light beckon us to change our lives. Early Friends came to Meeting for Worship expecting to be transformed. We might feel an inner change or opening toward kindness begin to draw us toward new ways of acting in the world. We might be led to repair a relationship or help others in a way that we might call "service." Or, we might be led to tell the truth about something in a public way that we might call "witness" like Friends holding a peace vigil or in a protest march.

The inner work of the Spirit or the Divine Presence can be mysterious and easy to overlook. The Spirit works through our regular, everyday feelings, gifts, thoughts, and relationships. It takes practice to be able to sense where the Inner Guide might be at work in us. The outward work of the Spirit can also be mysterious and can also be easy to overlook. Ordinary people doing ordinary things are often doing the work of love and justice in the world and have been guided or inspired by that which is eternal.

How do we tell the difference between our own thoughts and thoughts that seem to be inspired by the Divine Presence?

Give it the Love Test--When you think about every part of this idea or action, is there love and kindness directed to everyone this thought or action might touch?

Give it Time—Wait several days and see if the promptings of your heart still seem to be calling you in the same direction. At our house we say, "Before you are clear, you are unclear." Discernment takes time.

Give it to a larger group of Friends—Ask your family or Friends in your meeting to help you understand or discern what this leading might be.

Making Prayer a Part of our Daily Lives

The more we listen for God, the more we hear and sense the Presence. The more we follow leadings, the more we seem to be guided into further spirit-led action, witness, and service.

In that way, our connection with the Divine Presence seems to be like any other relationship. The more we take care and pay attention, the warmer and closer the relationship is. Prayer also seems to be like any other skill, the more we practice, the better we get.

It is important to intentionally create the space and time for prayer to happen. Below are a few ideas to use as jumping off points.

- Create a prayer corner at home. (See the page of suggestions.)
- Find a bit of Sabbath during the week.
Any way you can punctuate your week and give yourself time to pray, reflect, and nourish yourself spiritually is a great step!
- Be a "prayerful holder."
You can take your prayerful presence into your daily life without even letting anyone know what you are doing. Watch for the changes it seems to make in social situations that are often marred by friction and sour relationships.
- Make prayer and your spiritual journey an OK topic of conversation.
- Follow news of an illness or difficult situation in your family or community with a suggestion of some kind of intercessory prayer—holding in the Light, "sending them love," or "praying in color" for him or her by creating a special picture while focusing on their heart-felt connection with you and Spirit. (See **Praying In Color: Drawing a New Path to God** by Sybil MacBeth.)
- Ask the elders in your family about their faith.
They may be waiting for an opportunity to share the legacy of their lives in the Light. (Don't worry if they are not Quakers. They are part of your family, their experience is part of your

faith history. Focus on the experience behind the words.)

- If you are raising children or grandchildren, jot down a few notes when you sense that the children have had an encounter with Spirit/God or have come to a deeper place of compassion or gratitude or may have experienced a leading. (Your notes will create an informal spiritual biography of your children's or grandchildren's early lives.) Label the parts of their Quaker Journey giving them a faith vocabulary. Reflect on ways to nurture that possible growth in the Light further.

Beth Collea, RE Coordinator, NEYM
January 2012

The Work of Christmas

Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,

The work of Christmas begins:

- To find the lost,
- To heal the broken,
- To feed the hungry,
- To release the prisoner,
- To rebuild the nations,
- To bring peace among brothers and sisters,
- To make music in the heart.

Adapted from a piece created by Wellesley Friends Meeting.
Made available by New England Yearly Meeting.

Christmas Light

Seeking in the Spirit of the Season

Christmas Queries

On Simplicity:

In this time of commercialism, how do you reflect values of simplicity? In what ways do you and your family reflect on the significance of Jesus' life and his teachings regarding simplicity? Is your gift giving in line with these values? Have you been able to find rituals that enhance the experience of the Inner Light?

On Peace:

At this time of year, there is more attention given to "Peace on Earth." Is there significance in the birth of Jesus, the "Prince of Peace" that calls us to actively seek peace? What do you do to promote peace in the world? Are you able to find inner peace in the midst of everyday business? Do you walk gently and peacefully on the Earth, seeking that of God in others and in nature?

On Light:

In this time of winter darkness and cold, where do you find Light in your Life? As the shepherds waited for the good news, do you wait with an open heart for revelation? How do you and your family seek the Light and share it with others? Have you been able to find rituals that enhance the experience of the Inner Light?

On Preparation:

How does your family get ready for Christmas? What do you wish your family did around Christmas? At what age did you start giving presents to other people? Did someone work on them with you?

Friends' Suggestions for Savoring Christmastime at Home:

- Trim the tree, light the lights, turn off the lights in the house and gather as a family to sing carols.
- Visit "shut-in" neighbors with plates of cookies.
- Celebrate the darkest day with a special after-dark walk, come home and light a yule log.
- Make homemade gifts for family with the help of a parent.
- Read Truman Capote's A Christmas Memory. 1956.
- Listen to "Amahl and the Night Visitors."
- Read Take Joy: The Tasha Tudor Christmas Book.
- Read A Christmas Carol. Charles Dickens.
- Read Eight stories on Hanukkah: The Power of Light.
- Read The Best Christmas. Lee Kingman. on spirit of giving.

Reading the Christmas Story at Home

Children love to hear the Christmas story read aloud. You can use a Children's Bible or regular translation and make short explanations as needed. The version of the Christmas story you probably remember comes from Luke.

You may want to organize them into short Advent services with a short reading, the lighting of a candle, and a Christmas carol. You can name the candles in a variety of ways and children often like to help choose which name to use.

Begin 4 Sundays before Christmas lighting Candle 1. Each subsequent week, light the preceding candles and the new one.

Candle 1 (Prophecy, Prince of Peace)

Isaiah 9.2-6.

"O Come, O Come Emmanuel"

Candle 2 (Bethlehem, Joseph)

Luke 2.1-7

"O Little Town of Bethlehem"

Candle 3 (Shepherds)

Luke 2.8-14.

"While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night"

Candle 4 (Wise Men)

Matthew 2.1-12"

"We Three Kings"

Candle 5 (Jesus, Christmas) December 24

Luke 2.15-20.

"Joy to the World"

Easter Light

Seeking in the Spring of the Year

Easter Queries

In this season of renewal, what are some of the ways you experience rebirth in your own life? (i.e. physically, emotionally, spiritually, new patterns in your life, etc.) Do you find you have more energy this time of year? How do you use this energy to bring forth that of God in creation?

As you watch the miracle of plant life returning, do you find yourself contemplating life's miracles? Can you find ways to bring yourself into closer contact with nature and participate in its rebirthing energy? What do you learn from nature about resiliency? About hope? What do you learn about the balance between strength and fragility? About patterns of rest and growth? Roots and flowers? Life and death? How is your Inner Light nurtured by the season of renewal and light?

Does the story of Jesus' resurrection hold meaning for you and if so, in what ways? How do you understand this Biblical story that is the central theological 'event' for many Christians? Are you tolerant of how other people understand and celebrate Jesus' resurrection? How do you talk within your family about Easter and its significance? If you celebrate during this Easter season, have you found rituals that nourish your spirit and motivate you to seek that of God in the world?

Debbie Pryor

Adapted from a piece created by Wellesley Friends Meeting.

Made available for local meetings by NEYM.