The Ethics of Silence: The Sense of the Meeting

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Introduction

This paper is about the relationship between talk, silence and action, with a particular focus on the role of silence in business meetings. Silence is, we want to suggest, a neglected area of focus in Organization and Management Studies. Our paper aims to contribute to understanding the performative role of silence in organizations.

The following is from the 1966 feature film *A Man for All Seasons*, which was based on Robert Bolt's 1954 play of the same title. The dialogue is between Thomas Cromwell and Sir Thomas More, the sixteenth century Chancellor of England who refused to endorse King Henry VIII's wish to divorce Catherine of Aragon. Bolt portrays Sir Thomas More as the man of ultimate conscience, a man for whom silence, his unwillingness to speak in support of the king, led to his execution—More was a 'a man for all seasons'. More's silence speaks and his silence is a multiplicity that is contested and distributed across organizational time and space, it can also be a matter of life and death.

Thomas Cromwell: 'Now, Sir Thomas, you stand on your silence'.

Sir Thomas More: 'I do'.

Cromwell: 'But, gentlemen of the jury, there are many kinds of silence. Consider first the silence of a man who is dead. Let us suppose we go into the room where he is laid out, and we listen: what do we hear? Silence. What does it betoken, this silence? Nothing; this is silence pure and simple. But let us take another case. Suppose I were to take a dagger from my sleeve and make to kill the prisoner with it; and my lordships there, instead of crying out for me to stop, maintained their silence. That would betoken! It would betoken a willingness that I should do it, and under the law, they will be guilty with me. So silence can, according to the circumstances, speak! Let us consider now the circumstances of the prisoner's silence. The oath was put to loyal subjects up and down the country, and they all declared His Grace's title to be just and good. But when it came to the prisoner, he refused! He calls this silence. Yet is there a man in this court - is there a man in this country! - who does not know Sir Thomas More's opinion of this title?'

Cromwell: 'Yet how can this be? Because this silence betokened, nay, this silence was, not silence at all, but most eloquent denial!'

More: 'Not so. Not so, Master Secretary. The maxim is "*Qui tacet consentiret*": the maxim of the law is "Silence gives consent". If therefore you wish to construe what my silence betokened, you must construe that I consented, not that I denied'.

Cromwell: 'Is that in fact what the world construes from it? Do you pretend that is what you wish the world to construe from it?'

More: 'The world must construe according to its wits; this court must construe according to the law'.

Silent Meetings

This paper is concerned with the constitutive role of silence in organized contexts in particular within meetings. Why might silence be of interest to those studying organizational contexts? We want to suggest that silence can be discerned, not as an absence or the opposite of talk or speech, but as a performative act that can be analysed as negotiating issues of difference, unity and community in a way that features the processes of decision making as constitutive of communication.

We also want to show that there has been limited attention to silent practices in organizational studies of talk and communication (see Kuhling et al. 2003) and to open up silence as a concept worthy of further study. Our aim is to help remedy this lack of analytical and empirical focus on silence in Organization and Management Studies (but see Law 1998 for a study of Quaker meeting practices, and Spivak et al. (1996) on how the subaltern cannot speak) by focusing on the way in which silence is used in the business meetings of the Religious Society of Friends.

Whilst our paper is about the performativity of specific meeting practices, our paper does not focus on the literature on organizational meetings as such. There are, of course, a wide range of types of meeting including small group meetings, large shareholder meetings, plus there are meetings which have particular formats—scrum meetings for agile software development, away day meetings, speed business meetings and brainstorming meetings. For our purposes we are interested in the meeting as a particular instantiation of formalised interaction and group decision-making in an organizational or work context.

In a performative account of communication, of communication as constitutive, saying something is a doing. Performativity in relation to communication denotes how communication does not just communicate but enacts an action or performs an identity. By the same token silence is similarly also a doing. Butler (1990), for example, argues that commonplace communication and speech acts are performative in that they define gender identity (see also Barad 2003). For Butler this problematizes the idea that identity is primary and speech acts, conduct or gestures are secondary: identity is, rather, constituted by performative actions, conduct and gestures. Pickering (1993) has described this as a move from a 'representationalist idiom' to a 'performative idiom'.

This paper is organised as follows. The following section is a very brief introduction to the relevance of silence in Organization and Management Studies. This is followed by an introduction to the Religious Society of Friends—more commonly known as Quakers—and how silent meeting is the central feature of Quakers' practice. Quakers have been organising their meetings in the same way for over 350 years. As such this paper provides contributes to our understanding of a long-standing meeting practice. Drawing upon what others have said about their experience of a Quaker meeting for business, observation at a Quaker clerk workshop, and archived meeting minutes we describe what Quakers do at their meetings (i.e. while at the meeting, in preparing for a meeting and in writing a minute of the meeting) and how this constitutes their particular form of meeting in relation to a business meeting. Our paper concludes with a well-known (by Quakers) minute on Israel and Palestine from 2011. We conclude by suggesting that Quaker meeting practices provide a technology of foolishness and demonstrate how particular practices of interaction and writing can multiply our ways of knowing the organised world.

Silence and Organising

Silence is, we think, an under-researched topic in Organization and Management Studies. Scott (1993) challenged the concept of silence as lacking meaning, suggesting that silence has different forms and purposes; he presents, by contrast, a taxonomy of silence. As we will index throughout the paper, for Quakers, silence can be discerned as having qualities such as: active, redemptive, nourishing, prayerful expectancy, an intensified pause and as a form of liberation.

Similarly in this paper we argue it is impossible to conceive of silence as not speaking about something. Silence is, we argue, the constitutive supplement (Derrida 1997) that is always bound up with letting others or other things speak: silence is relational and is never on its own. It is never just self-evidently present, and it is never just an absence of talk or a void. Others have noted that listening is important to decision making (e.g., Ellis and Fisher 1994), but few studies have emphasised the generative and constitutive role of silence in making decisions (but see Covarrubias 2007). On this point, Acheson (2008: 551, in Molina-Markham 2014: 156) writes that:

> If we are to understand silences in all their complexity, not simply as a field for speech, and not merely as a zero-signifier when the speech object is missing from that field, *the study of silences as events*, like speech, like action, must become the rule. (our emphasis added)

In order to understand the performativity of silence, to overcome the commonplace assumptions associated with silence, that is, as an absence of talk or just an expression of simplicity outside of everyday concerns, we focus the paper on introducing and explaining how monthly Quaker business meetings are organized and how decisions are made at such meetings.

Introducing the Religious Society of Friends or Quakers

Our focus in this paper is on the performativity of silence in the monthly business meetings of the 'Religious Society of Friends'. More commonly known as Quakers, Quakerism was a seventeenth century non-conformist religious movement that was born in the political unrest, religious turmoil and civil upheaval of 1650s England—within the period which historians call the 'Century of Revolution'. George Fox, a shoemaker from Leicestershire, is widely regarded as the founder of Quakerism. Swarthmore Hall, the home of Margaret Fell, in Ulveston (in the county of Cumbria in the North West of England) is considered to be the historic administrative birthplace of the Society of Friends.

Quakers are a small (around 350,000 worldwide today) and little known Christian religion. Though small in numbers many have suggested this relative invisibility belies their impact both historical and contemporary (Furtado (2013) with a disproportionate number of scientists, thinkers, campaigners for peace and businesspeople since the 1650s. Despite the freedom to practice their religious granted by the Act of Toleration in 1689, Quakers

remained excluded from many professions at the birth of the industrial revolution. Quakers often focused on entrepreneurship and business and made a significant impact on industrial society founding banks such as Barclays (they were trusted in financial transactions as they did not negotiate prices). Technology companies such as Thomas Watson's IBM, and perhaps more surprisingly Sony in Japan, were founded by Quakers. In the UK, Cadbury's, Rowntree's and Fry's were well-known Quaker companies. As part of a commitment to social action, Quakers founded civil society organizations such as Oxfam, for example. Since 2001, Elizabeth Fry, the nineteenth century Quaker campaigner for the humane treatment of prisoners, has been depicted on the Bank of England £5 note.

The most famous of all Quakers, at least in the United States, is the English aristocrat William Penn, a real estate entrepreneur and the founder of the Province of Pennsylvania—what would become the State of Pennsylvania. Penn was an early advocate of democracy and religious freedom, and was known for successful treaties and cooperation with the Lenape Indians (see Baltzell 1996 for a comparative study of elites in Quaker Philadelphia and Puritan Boston). In the sphere of Organization and Management Studies, Frederick Taylor, was the son of a notable Quaker family in Philadelphia. It was in this American milieu that another Quaker, Joseph Wharton, founded one of America's first business schools (Baltzell 1996).

Quaker Practice and the Constitutive Role of Meeting

At the centre of Quaker thought and practice is the idea that the basis of their faith is a direct relationship and experience of God or the Divine. To live experimentally through experience (the joint etymology of 'experiment' and 'experience') God for oneself was, for Fox and the 'Early Friends', a direct experience of the Second Coming of Christ. Quakers undertake this waiting by listening with others in silence. This 'silent waiting has a liberating quality. It is an active experience in which we become more present' (Wall 2010: 198).

The contention 'that of god in everyone' means that Quakers believe that everyone is equal before God. From this belief, traditional distinctions (in language, conduct, dress, for example) were irrelevant, as was hierarchy, formal or paid leadership or ministers, and there were no creedal formulas or set rituals. Quakerism might be usefully understood as something of a collective DIY (Do-It-Yourself) religion since its formation in the seventeenth century

and in contemporary expression. Because there is no creed to follow, many Quakers particularly 'un-programmed Friends' in the UK and US no longer see themselves as Christians or waiting to be saved by the resurrection of Christ—there is then a diversity of non-theist Quakers, Buddhist Quakers, Muslim Quakers, etc.

The term 'Meeting' is at the centre of Quaker practice—nearly every form of interaction is denoted as a meeting—from the first days of the Early Friends in the seventeenth century. For Quakers meeting denotes a noun—a Meeting House—and a verb—something they do. Quaker might say 'At meeting this morning …'. Those attending a Quaker meeting encounter others at meeting for worship at a Meeting House. Meeting is termed 'Meeting for Worship' and other assemblies are called Local Meeting, Area Meeting and Yearly Meeting in the UK.

Our focus in this paper is on Meeting for Worship for Business—a regular monthly meeting, which decides upon matters including, for instance, the type of seats for a meeting house, who can use the meeting house and which charities to support. Other committees such as Premises or Children's Committee report to the Meeting for Business. In the UK, for example, Quakers organise their regional and national meetings according to the same principles and practices as a local meeting for worship. Because all meeting have the same format and premise, business meetings are termed 'Meetings for Worship for Business' and are also conducted with silence as their central feature.

Quakers and Silence

The central shared experience of Quakers is the silent meeting for worship, and this seeks to create a 'gathered stillness'. Sitting with others in silence (although it is of course never completely silent—clocks tick, radiators murmur , birds sing, adults cough, children fidget, and so on). In a way a silent meeting is actually far from utterly silent.

The emphasis on the direct experience of God, on what is termed the 'inner light', led to the early Quakers adopting their unique form of worship, which remains central to Quakers in the twenty-first century: sitting communally in silence. Instead of a religious service given by a priest or bishop, Quakers hold 'Meetings for Worship' in meeting houses. The seating at a meeting is usually in a circle or square formation, which helps people be aware of those around them and that they are worshipping with others as equals. Meeting for worship comprises of sitting in silence typically for an hour on Sunday mornings, waiting and

listening for the word of God. The monthly meeting for worship for business takes place after the meeting for worship. If moved to do so, anyone attending the meeting can speak—give vocal ministry—on any subject. Sometimes a meeting comprises a number of vocal ministries on a range of subjects or issues, sometimes one person says or reads something for a few minutes and sometimes there is silence for the entire meeting.

Meetings take place in simple and plain looking buildings—meeting houses. Men, women and children attend meetings—dog pens are available in some older, rural meeting houses. There is typically a range of style of chairs and benches to accommodate people who want to sit differently. Somewhere in the room will be a copy of *Quaker Faith and Practice*, which is composed of 'Advices and Queries', questions for Quakers to reflect upon. *Quaker Faith and Practice*, which is updated and reviewed regularly, comprises regulations on the 'right ordering' of meetings plus many short quotations collected from the 1650s. These quotations are designed to inspire, challenge and encourage to Quakers in their everyday lives and provide questions to be reflected upon.

Performing Silence

The actions, conduct and gestures of silence at a Quaker meeting enact the silent worship of the meeting. What is important to grasp for our purposes is that silence enacts the meeting for worship, a meeting which is in itself already assumed as a condition of possibility in the actions, conduct and gestures of silence. In this way the repetition of practices (once a week on Sunday) associated with Quaker meetings denote how sitting in communal silence not only describes what Quakers do at a meeting but also performs what they do. Sitting in communal silence enacts the meeting as a meeting for worship that is constitutively assumed in the silence. In a performative explanation of communication, silence through its silence carries out an action and exhibits a certain type of power at a Quaker meeting—that is, for many at the meeting, it enacts the power of God, the Divine or what is often termed 'the light'.

Quaker business meetings are very different from more typical meetings because it is the silence that is ever present: meetings are rarely characterised by long period of silence. Law (1998: 20) writes about the particular character of this silence at a Quaker meeting:

It is not heavy and preoccupied, like the desperate hush of the exam room. Nor is it disciplinary and repressive, like the pressure that expands to fill the space of the parade ground where you hardly dare breathe. It is not the silence of the graveyard, with its imagined echoes and distant memories. Nor is it the silence you hear when you lie in the sun … It is none of these, though perhaps the last of these comes closest to it. Instead it is, as they say a 'centred' silence.

Many things have to be in place, arranged in a particular manner, however, for a Quaker meeting to constitute an active silence. The distribution of silence takes a number of forms— at the beginning and end of meeting, as well as during a meeting between speakers. This distribution is in part coordinated by the clerk of the meeting, in part by the way seats are arranged, in part by the lack of religious symbols, actively invokes a particular version of community. Those assembled are sitting, listening and waiting. Quakers do not wear special robes to signify role and status, they have no altar, there are no ministers, and no formal hierarchy. These specific arrangements along with the set-up of the meeting houses seek out and produce the active silence of a Quaker meeting. In this way, the constitutive silence, which is beyond the individuals at the meeting, cannot do without arrangements of people, paper, chairs and books, as well as other logo-centric devices. In this way the silence seems to be everywhere at a Quaker Meeting, it performs the entirety of the meeting, and yet the silence is nowhere in no one person in particular.

Although it is individuals who are sitting in silence, the silence comes from somewhere. Sitting in collective silence is directed at becoming 'gathered'. For Quaker becoming 'gathered' denotes becoming open to inspiration from 'God', or 'the spirit' or 'the light' Maitland (2008: 142-3) quotes:

Not sure what I think of a 'gathered condition' – it changes as I continue to attend – it started off as a quite private experience with me meditating and then praying, but amongst people. And when people ministered (spoke out in the meeting) it felt like an interruption that I couldn't assimilate and had to make some effort not to be annoyed by before I returned to my private experience. But recently it has begun to feel more seamless and I'm able to listen to people without feeling disrupted … even if they don't 'speak to my condition' … But is being gathered about sameness of opinion? Isn't true gatheredness about being able to articulate and bridge difference? Perhaps

gatheredness and fragmentation are true at once and the meeting is an attempt to
cultivate the former.

This gathered stillness helps Quaker's listen to what they discern as the 'promptings of truth
and love in our hearts'.

The Sense of the Meeting: Corporate Discernment

Some Quaker communities, particularly those in Europe and in the US known as 'un-
programmed friends', employ a practice of listening in communal and attentive silence for
'the Light' or the Divine in order to make decisions. The Quaker focus on silence foregrounds
the performative role process has in constituting the sense of the meeting for Quakers (see
Bauman 1983; Lippard 1988; Ferguson 2011). Finding 'the sense of the meeting' requires a
unity amongst the friends at the meeting on a particular point or issue.

Sheeran (1996) and Wick (1998) have undertaken studies of Quaker decision making.
Quaker's organize monthly business meetings in addition to a weekly meeting for worship—
deciding upon everything from what colour to paint the meeting house internal walls to
whether to provide active support and campaign for the right to same sex marriage. *Contra*
common sense understanding, in which we are responsible for what we say, Quakers view
decision making as a process premised upon communal and attentive silence. Quakers
distinguish between 'the sense of a meeting' and consensus. Consensus forms of decision
making often involve the integration of differing positions within a group or a majority will—
as in a democracy. Quakers do not vote at meetings, they discern the sense of the meeting:
agreement is 'sensed' and not voted on. Morley (1993: 5) writes:

> Through consensus we decide it; through sense of the meeting we turn it over,
> *allowing it to be decided* (quoted in Mace 2013: 43, emphasis added)

This remarkable quote suggests that, for Quakers, the silence is active in constituting the
decision at a non-individualist level. The silence is not located in singular actors—people,
chairs, draft minutes, flowers on the table—sitting at a meeting but moves through actors to
afford the sense of the meeting *as a meeting* with a particular content and form. How can this
silence be analysed? Following Serres (1982) we might suggest that the silence can be
conceived through his metaphor of a parasite. The parasite brings a certain form of noise into

the practice of decision-making. For our purposes, following Serres (1982: 230), 'the position of the parasite is to be between'. The silence as parasite belongs neither to the individuals nor those assembled, rather it is both and neither—because silence is an integral part of how the meeting takes place and what the meeting is about. Silence is then is a relational third (Serres 1982: 234) that is simultaneously a part of and the whole of the meeting for worship.

In a Quaker meeting there is, we suggest, a shared understanding of the role of silence and what silence performs—to finding the sense of the meeting. Molina-Markham (2013: 171) argues that the process of decision making is more important than the decisions made:

> The process of meeting for business is more important than the decisions that result. Relying on ''sense of the meeting'' offered a possibility for creating and sustaining community in decision making that may not be possible in other contexts when voting is relied on. While voting separates a group into those who agree and those who disagree, ''sense of the meeting'' sought to include everyone, even those who disagreed, recognizing that their disagreement was an element of the ''sense of the meeting.

The sense of the meeting cannot be separated from practices associated with the meeting—it means to be to be *acted upon and performed through the experience of the meeting* (Law 1998).

Technologies of Presence: Before the Meeting

Quakers make decisions not through debate, argument or persuasion but through listening for unity. The emphasis is not upon consensus. Listening to the Divine through what each person says and through the presence of all. Those attending Quaker meetings typically undertake roles on committees as part of the administrative work of a meeting. Since there are no paid clergy this means that members of the meeting often need to be involved in running the day-to-day affairs of a meeting. One of the key roles is that of Clerk for Meeting for Business and often this are two clerks who share this role—co-clerks. This is considered to be an important position of responsibility and is not always a position for which many wish to volunteer, partly because of the time commitment associated with this administrative responsibility and partly because it is considered a significant responsibility at the meeting. The prospect of being a Quaker clerk is often contra to experiences of running other types of meeting:

> Friends have been so competent in running the business of the world that they have always been at risk of eroding their life as Friends by assimilating the secular values of efficiency, decisiveness and dispatch (Redfern 1994: 8)

In researching this paper, one of us attended a three-day workshop as an observer on 'Being a Quaker Clerk' at the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham, UK. This is the Quaker's national conference and training centre—the former home of the Cadbury family. This workshop was attended by 20 people who either were or would soon be clerks at a monthly Quaker business meeting. The three-day workshop comprised of meetings for worship at the beginning and end of the day, practical exercises for preparing and running a meeting for business, sharing experiences in the group and role-playing a meeting for business. Workshop sessions took place in a room set out in the way a meeting for worship is arranged. Mealtimes were communal with other workshop participants and others at the study centre, with the working day starting at 8.30 am and finishing with a meeting for worship at around 9 pm.

One particular workshop exercise is instructive for how Quakers organise themselves in relation to others and demonstrates the performativity of their practices. As part of the workshop, one morning was spent in small groups of 3-4 deciding the order of agenda items for a fictitious business meeting. We were given a list of items which we had to order as we thought appropriate. There was considerable debate within each group and between groups as to the best order for agenda items—it was surprising perhaps that a half-day could be taken up with what might be considered a relatively unimportant and mundane administrative matter in other organizational contexts.

One particular agenda item caused considerable discussion throughout the morning—a report to the meeting from a young Friend who had been on an overseas visit as part of Quaker youth activities. Whilst this report was not central to the meeting for business, for many it was felt to be important that this young friend be given a prominent position in the agenda to signal the importance of young people's views. Others suggested the young person might be nervous speaking at a meeting so it would be kind to 'get the report over with'. This led to a discussion of at what age children might participate in a business meeting. No final guidance of how to set an agenda was given by the workshop convenors, yet everyone finished the exercise enriched by the collaborative learning.

This sense of presence of others applies to meeting that will happen in the future. In preparing for business meetings clerks are encouraged to prepare draft minutes of a forthcoming business meeting—sometimes clerks will have 2-3 draft minutes prepared for an important agenda item before a meeting. This is an unusual and practice in most organizational contexts with meeting minutes written up and edited after the meeting not before the meeting. Redfern (1994: 14) writes:

> Thorough meeting preparation will include the writing of draft minutes of all items of record and/or those needing no complex decision making process. Have as many minutes as possible ready before the meeting starts …If you expect the lengthy consideration of an item, try to plan for several possible outcomes with different drafts … a draft could have two endings. But remember that no minute written beforehand can be expected to fully represent what has happened in the meeting—the final minute must belong to the meeting itself. It may be necessary to change a draft, possibly quite considerably but, even so, having written it earlier will save a lot of time.

The draft minute is considered to be an affordance that helps the clerk sum up the sense of the meeting. During the meeting the draft minute, which only the clerk will see, will be edited, reworked and modified by the clerk in real-time as they listen with others to the interventions from those present at the meeting. Some participants at workshop said that they had experienced clerks who knew their meeting so well they could write very good draft minutes ahead of the meeting.

There was little explicit discussion of the basis of this pre-meeting draft minute writing practice and nobody at the workshop knew where the practice originated or when it started. Yet it seems significant at least in organizational terms compared to most meeting practices. Wall (2010: 204-6) writes about how that 'the presence of each of us changes the quality of the silence we experience, it is important to acknowledge each other's presence' during a meeting, and continues that each 'individual brings their presence to meeting whether spoken or unspoken and it affects the meeting as a whole'. What this indexes is that the clerk has a sense of community and embodies that in their own preparations for being the clerk at a business meeting. The presence of others continues beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of the meeting room or business meeting to include the presence of others while drafting the pre-meeting minute sense of the meeting. But as Mace (2012: 91) quotes from *Quaker Faith and Practice*:

In conducting the meeting and in drafting the minutes on its behalf, the clerk's abilities are strengthened by an awareness of being supported by the members of the meeting. Friends who have not known the unforeseen joy which comes from this experience may gain encouragement from this knowledge … then strength beyond his or her normal powers will be given.

'The matter is before the meeting' is both literal and instructive of the sense of community through which the draft minutes give expression to Quaker values.

Listening and Waiting in Particular Ways: Everyone Clerking

Clerks are responsible for preparing agendas, summarising an issue or problem before a discussion, encouraging others to speak, maintaining discipline, and, of course, judging the sense of the meeting. As Quaker's stand to speak at their meetings, the clerk may have call people to speak and ask others to wait. Sheeran (1983) suggests, for instance, that clerks must draw out those who have not spoken because of their opposition so as to ensure that their voice is heard. Without this clerking practice some might consider they had not part in what others decided. Encouraging some to speak comes out of periods of silence.

The clerk has the particular role of writing the minute of the Quaker business meeting, their role is to discern the sense of the meeting, is integral to what March (1988) refers to as the 'technology of foolishness', to multiple ways of knowing. Quakers write the minute of the meeting during the meeting, to be agreed in the meeting while everyone is present. Although the clerk writes the minute—the written record of the sense of the meeting, which is very important for Quaker's (Baltzell 1996)—it is 'axiomatic that the clerk clerks best when everyone is clerking together' (Loring 1997: 91 in Mace 2012: 44). Writing has had a central role in Quaker's practice since the earliest days of the movement. Fox's *Journal*, which was first published in 1694, is considered to be a biographical record and enactment of the central Quaker belief in an indwelling Christ (see Hinds and Findlay 2007). This focus on the business meeting as a collective and shared task, in which the clerk is a conduit for discernment, which comes out of periods of talk and silence. Others may not be speaking but they are listening, in silence. Mace (2012: 50) continues:

The clerks bowed over the table together, working on the minute … The assembled Friends still. After a few minutes, the clerk rose to her feet, stood holding her large

notebook and read out of the draft. She then sat down again. During the next 15 minutes, some half dozen Friends from different parts of the gathering stood waiting to be called, to offer still more amendments.

Those at the meeting do not end the meeting by saying they agree with the Minute. They say 'hope so'. Quaker meetings build on the experience of those gathered at the meeting and 'uphold the clerk' while they are completing a draft minute. Sitting in silence, Friends experience something beyond themselves. It is, we have suggested, the primacy of the experience of the event of the meeting which is central to Quaker's business meetings. Silence produces this event; it dominates the conduct of those at the meeting, as they meet to make a decision from the sense of the meeting. Sheeran (1983: 81-82) writes that:

> No matter how they explain the experience to themselves, the event which they share is paramount … Because Friends differ in their understanding of experience, the devices used in the meetings are subtle invitations to re-enter the experience rather than formal reminders of Quaker belief. The opening and closing silences and the moments of special reflection at times of impasse or conflict all recall those present to the experience, each remaining free to enter the experience through his or her own understanding.

When asked to recall a business meeting decision that meant the most, Quakers often describe how the experience of a 'gathered condition', of a unity, is what counts most (Sheeran 1983: 87). Sitting in silence, listening and waiting, performs this gathered condition of community. Quakers place great emphasise on written minutes yet as Redfern (1994: 24) suggests there is a constitutive ineffability about the meeting process:

> Later we may stop to wonder whose idea evolved into the sense of the meeting. But we can't remember. Often the person through whom the idea came cannot remember. We sense that the sense of the meeting came through us, but not from us. We are amazed that is works—exactly as it's supposed to.

We thought it would be valuable to include a Minute from a Quaker meeting since the written minutes of meetings are so central to Quaker practice. The Minute from Meeting for Suffering is from a yearly meeting held in Friends House, London in 2011 (see Box 1). It is minute that is cherished as a 'wonderful minute' by many in the Quaker community. Not because of its political position on Israel and the West Bank (although this cannot be

excluded) but because it is a minute which many believed really expressed 'the sense of the meeting' that constituted its writing. We reproduce the Minute in full below as an exhibit of the plain style and concise format of a Quaker meeting minute—in this case on an important geo-political issue. Redfern (1994: 19) suggests that minutes 'should not be unnecessarily long or full of "flowery" language'.

A few points are worth noting. The below Minute records the Local and Area meetings minutes which were sent to Yearly Meeting and summarises the process which the clerk has undertaken. The Minute repeats Quaker's commitment to a peace testimony and quotes from *Quaker Faith and Practice*. Importantly, the Minute indexes the provisional nature of the minute and records that that Quakers still have different views on this matter.

Box 1: Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (Israel/Palestine)

5 April 2011

Further to minute S/11/02/4 of 5 February 2011, we receive minutes on this matter from the following Area Meetings: Southern Marches (paper S/11/04/mc i a), Sussex East (i b), Surrey & Hampshire Border (i c), Swarthmoor (i f), North London (i g), Cambridgeshire (i h), East Cheshire (i i), Ipswich & Diss (i j), North West London (i k), Bristol (i l), Hampshire & Islands (i m), Devon (i n), Manchester & Warrington (i o) and North Cumbria (i p).

Our assistant clerk has summarized the 14 Area Meeting minutes received, and we have returned to our consideration of the issues raised in the papers received at our last meeting (paper S/11/02/A prepared by Marigold Bentley, Assistant General Secretary of Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW), the Kairos Palestine Document A moment of truth (paper S/11/02/B), and the Quaker Council for European Affairs Discussion Paper entitled Responses to the call for boycott, divestment and sanctions (S/11/02/C)).

We have heard of the responses of Jewish Peace Groups within Israel. We hear these Israeli citizens risk being criminalised by their government if they actively support the Palestinian call for cultural and economic boycott. We were informed that most Jewish Israeli Peace Groups support the boycott of settlement goods, and only some support a boycott of Israel.

A just peace for Palestine means security for Israel too, and nonviolent protests by both Israelis and Palestinians for the end of the occupation are heartening to observe.

For nine years Quakers have been witnessing individually and through the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) to the human rights abuses of the military occupation of the Palestinian Territories. Today we have considered whether we should add nonviolent action to our witnessing – not as punishment or revenge, but as an external pressure to achieve change.

We understand the history and the trauma of the past, but it is Israelis who are the stronger and they need to make the changes.

John Woolman's words (Quaker Faith & Practice 26.61) remind us of the powerful sense we have of being brothers and sisters with people of other faiths. There are three main faiths in this part of the world, and we want to proceed in ways which allow dialogue to continue. We consider we should now act publically and, well-informed, be able to explain our action to others - because people matter more than territory, and because we approach others with a desire for peace.

Difficult decisions taken by us today can be reversed. The request for boycott comes from those who will suffer most, but a decision for boycott will give hope to Palestinians and support to those in Israel who are working for peace.

In the face of the armed oppression of poor people and the increasing encroachment of the illegal settlements in the West Bank, we cannot do nothing.

Our hearts are full of compassion for Israelis and Palestinians, all of whom are suffering from the effects of the occupation.

We are clear that it would be wrong to support the illegal settlements by purchasing their goods. We therefore ask Friends (Quakers) throughout Britain Yearly Meeting to boycott settlement goods, until such time as the occupation is ended.

We are not at this time proposing to boycott goods from Israel itself, being unwilling to jeopardise continuing dialogue with Israelis and British Jews.

We pray fervently for both Israelis and Palestinians, keeping them together in our hearts. We hope they will find an end to their fears and the beginning of their mutual co-existence based on a just peace. And so we look forward to the end of the occupation and the end of the international boycott. We envisage our future relationship with both peoples as one of loving

and generous co-operation.

Although we unite in this decision we recognise that Friends have different views, and we must treat one another tenderly.

Source: https://www.quaker.org.uk/quakers-boycott-products-israeli-settlements

Conclusion: The Provisional and Empty Chair …

Edmund Burke famously said: 'All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing'. We have argued that silence, rather than the absence of action, can be discerned as a performative act, an active practice, that produces a particular form of organising, enacting particular types of decisions, as well as particular identities.

We have suggested that a performative account of Quaker meeting for worship for business provides a novel perspective on silent meetings. We think that the account of Quaker meeting practices would be recognised by many Quakers even though this paper is aimed at a different constituency. Practices perform what they perform (Law 1998), but they also produce otherness—the adherence to particular ways of speaking, listening and sitting in silence at a Quaker business meeting produces the meeting as well as something beyond the meeting.

We conclude the paper by suggesting that silence plays a constitutive role in decision making at Quaker business meetings. The talk, listening, waiting and, as we have suggested, silence 'speak the experience', the active event of sitting together communally. Quaker meetings perform the experience community decision-making in a unique way. We are reminded of March's (1988: 265) technologies of foolishness which help to complicate processes of understanding and knowing:

> There is little magic in the world, and foolishness in people and organizations is one of the many things that fail to produce miracles. Under certain conditions, it is one of several ways in which some of the problems of our current theories of intelligence can be overcome. It may be a good way. It preserves the virtues of consistency while stimulating change. If we had a good technology of foolishness, it might (in combination with the technology of reason) help in a small way to develop unusual

combinations of attitudes and behaviours that describe the interesting people, interesting organizations, and interesting societies of the world.

We have tried to show how, for Quakers assembled into a gathered silence, the actions, conduct and gestures of silence perform their beloved meeting at a meeting house. Are these practices a technology of foolishness? Why do Quaker's say 'I hope so' after a draft minute is accepted? Mace 2012: 120) writes: 'I think it means to pay respect to the presence in the empty chair … it's an expression with an element of provisionality about it … I am trusting our discernment has taken us to this place, but I am recognising that we might not have not'.

Sustained in the same way for over 350 years, this unique way of meeting 'in the manner of Friends' presages a call for further studies into the performativity of silence amongst an organizational world of talk. As Quaker's are often heard saying – 'I hope so …'.

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