

Quaker Learning Circle 2008 Report

Report to Wahroonga Local Meeting
By Members of 2008 Quaker Learning Circle.
January 2009.

Summary

“I have rediscovered the mystery and wonder of Christ/Spirit and of Life, things that I might better express in art than in words.”

We conducted a monthly Quaker Learning Circle at Wahroonga Local Meeting from August to December 2008 to support learning by each person following their inner light, whose guidance is more relevant to our condition than a curriculum set by a teacher. Participants in the circle report that the learning circle helped us to answer George Fox’s question: “What canst thou say?” Some spoke of a profound and quakerly experience. We would like to continue learning circles in 2009 with minor improvements, and offer the opportunity to others.

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Exhibit 1: Learning spiral



Introduction

Eleven regular worshippers at Wahroonga Local Meeting met for Quaker Learning Circles once each month from August to December 2008, with a minimum of 9 attending each circle. Each of us followed our inner light, whose guidance is more relevant to our condition than a curriculum set by a teacher. Quaker Learning Circle is one kind of Friendly Learning Circle (see <http://friendly.wikidot.com/>). Our aim was to support and help each of us to answer George Fox's question: 'What canst thou say?' in a supportive community, a circle of trust to accompany us a little way on our journey toward truth.

Process

The learning circle supported the individual learning path of each participant. We had no common curriculum and did not assume that everyone has the same needs or interests. We aimed to support each other to follow our leadings through reading, doing and other experiences, guided by our inner light. The learning circle process is different to Quaker Basics and Quaker Learning.

Seeking to answer 'What canst thou say?' each of us decided on a learning project and followed an individual learning path. The Spirit led us between meetings through our actions, our creative activity and reading from various faith traditions, philosophy, science, literature and the arts. Once each month, through listening, conversation and silence we supported each other in reflection on each person's learning since the last meeting.

With learning and preparation between meetings, our circle became a time in which we could grow in knowledge for our inner growth, our interpersonal relationships and our social responsibilities; that is, our faith, practice and testimonies. Our diverse

learning activities enabled us to make connections between external realities, such as how animals are treated; historical facts like the treatment of Aboriginal people; scientific theories such as complexity theory; religious texts such as the writings of Christian women mystics; Quaker writings on learning and spiritual friendship and service in our Meeting. We were able to participate in a network of meanings, understandings and insights which both illuminated our own path and helped us to understand our friends. For at least some of us, this helped us to hear and reconcile our inner and outer voices.

Three hours (from 11:20 to 2:30) one Sunday each month were allocated for the circle, with a shared lunch (the agenda is attached as Appendix 1). Most months we brought a pot of green tea into the start of the meeting, then after about one hour broke for about ten minutes to bring a shared lunch into the meeting room. We varied this in two meetings, continuing without a break, finishing before 2:30 and then sharing lunch. Sharing refreshments and food added to the quality of interaction.

A Facilitator, Co-facilitator and Timekeeper assisted each meeting. The Facilitator is not a teacher. His or her task is to attend to the process of leaning rather than the accumulation or display of knowledge. Responsibility for success lay in the commitment of all participants.

Exhibit 2: Poem.

Hildegard was called by God
to “burst forth in a fountain of abundance”
we, too, respond to this holy invitation
to speak and write from our own experience

each tentative
calm
bubbling
gushing
stream
in turn
fills the sacred space

when I speak
no thoughts about flowing
I simply become “stream”
trusting the ground
trusting the Source
connected to all

we listen. listen beneath the words
witness to a birthing
witness to a journey
we become stones
lining the way
moistened and smoothed, supporting and
shaping

in the silence, in the music
in hands joined
the Spirit gathers us
refreshed, replenished
in sweet community

Evaluation

At the end of the year we answered 7 open ended evaluation questions (Appendix 2). Eight (72%) of us returned fully completed questionnaires, and others made verbal comments. This report is based on completed questionnaires, documents used during learning circles and notes made during meetings. In this report words in italics are taken directly from answers to evaluation questions.

Our projects were:

- What is God: Starting to write a paper.
- Listening to the ancestors: Learning to connect deeply with this land, mourning for past tragedies and becoming committed to caring for country.
- Sanctity of life for all beings: Learning about Quaker action to protect animals.
- Happiness and sustainability: Exploring patterns, approaches, teachings and views.
- Living with the female Mystics - Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena and Hildegard of Bingen.
- Work as a spiritual practice: How to live my values in my professional work.
- Writings and teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh
- Quaker Tapestry: Learning to organise Quakers
- Art and spirituality: Learning, exploring and expressing the spiritual.
- Learning what I do not know: Listening.
- One of four Quakers and Jesus: Discovering who Jesus is for me.

“Our learning circle allowed all participants to develop their own responses to “What canst thou say?” in an affirming and respectful space.” One of us wrote: *“QLC does help me answer that question. It does this by making me focus my efforts and experiences, because I feel I have to account for myself each month, so must do something, instead of just thinking about doing something.”* One participant commented that the circle was *“profoundly Quaker in content and process”* and another that *“It helps me to answer what ... I can say about God.”* Another wrote that on *“when it was my turn to speak, I spoke from the heart, raw and not well articulated but a truth within me”* For several of us the learning circle helped to give voice to the spiritual paths we are drawn to, enabling us to attend to the inner voice, and find ways to express this in outer action.

We valued the *“listening, feedback, ideas, help, care, shoulders to cry on, kind words,”* questions, contacts, links to other groups, reading material, web sites, awareness and the support in finding and exploring our truths. One of us wrote: *“While we are all individuals and responsible for and to ourselves, humans grow better in relationship; this is what QLC provides.”* Three participants commented that in the monthly process of preparing for and participating in the learning circle we felt accountable for examining and developing our own interior life and spiritual growth. *“It also provides a legitimation, a feeling that: Yes, what I want to do/learn is worthwhile”* while *“the variety of leadings and diversity and passion that developed from our first learning circle was quite amazing!”*

Participants valued the learning circle. In evaluation we wrote that the best thing about Quaker Learning Circle was *“meeting in an atmosphere of trust with a group of Friends for deep and meaningful conversation”*; *“sharing really significant matters of our own choosing and being sacred witnesses to each person's gifts and growth”*. *“It was fascinating to be part of the diversity of interests that the group members chose.”* We appreciated *“the challenge, legitimation and motivation developed in the circle.”* And *“feeling supported yet challenged to continue with a leading.”* The *“wonderful synergies”* in our gathering generated trust and support which some felt as an almost tangible spirituality.

One of us found *“the learning circle has assisted me in articulating the value of [my professional] work through writing up... a case study to share with others in the ... field, thereby being a voice for social justice in the field.”*

The exhibits included in this report are expressions by four of us of our experience of learning in the Circle. Participants also reported that we learned:

- About trusting our experiences of the Divine.
- About imagery, art, creativity and spirituality.
- About being a Friend.
- About other friends' spiritual learning.

No participants responded to evaluation questions with negative comments, but three did not respond with written evaluations, and in this small group negative experiences may not have been reported.

Outcomes

The Learning Circle has opened individual spiritual paths for us. One of us wrote: *“I have rediscovered the mystery and wonder of Christ/Spirit and of Life, things that I might better express in art than in words.”* Another wrote: *“I learned more about Buddhist teachings, though my main interest was in finding ways of using [these] practises in my every day life and in conjunction with Quaker methods. I think it gave me easier access into finding the quiet centre and maintaining the silence.”* A third: *“What I have learned so far is a new approach to thinking about Christ who is the foundation of my beliefs, and I have experienced an opening up of what my art means to me. That is, that this year with QLC has put me on a new road, and I feel that I am just at the start of a new journey.”* And a fourth person wrote: *“The first day of our Quaker Learning Circle I didn't know what I was going to talk about, however ... when it was my turn to speak, I spoke from the heart, raw and not well articulated but a truth within me, which has continued to grow.”* And another: *“being part of a supportive group away from the work environment has allowed me to integrate my work and faith practice”*.

- Two of us have been invited to present Quaker Learning sessions related to our learning circle projects.
- One presented a peer reviewed paper related to her learning circle project at a professional conference.
- One participant has set up a web based Wiki as a development from his learning circle project.

Exhibit 3: Quotes

Nothing will benefit human health and increase chances for survival of life on earth as much as the evolution to a vegetarian diet (Albert Einstein, 1879-1955)

The Eating of meat extinguishes the seed of great compassion (The Buddha circa 563-483 B.C.)

The love for all living creatures is the noblest attribute of man (Charles Darwin 1809-1882)

But for the sake of some little mouthful of meat, we deprive a soul of the sun and light, and of that proportion of life and time it had been born into the world to enjoy (Seneca C.5-C.E.65)

The challenge

Is it “*enough in the long run for the group to be merely a monthly pat on the back?*” Achieving the full potential of learning circles is a challenge. “*QLC is not just a friendly meeting one can pop into when one feels like it, but needs a strong commitment, including a commitment of time: time through the month to learn and experience and think and compose, and time to attend each [meeting]*” for “*participants [to] have the courage to be open to follow their own leadings and continue to look for support from the other participants.*” If we come to learning circles without “*all participants (including me) spending some time prior to the gathering in reflecting on their work*” or without preparing answers to the questions for reflection, we may not grow in learning and wisdom. “*The best thing about QLC is that it made me focus on a topic and I had to apply myself, seek and read about it. So easily inertia takes over!*” If we are not attentive and mindful during the circle we may miss opportunities to understand and support others. Something emerges in the group process that is more than the individuals. We need to nurture this and be mindful of “*why and how we meet as a learning circle*”.

Limitations

Quaker Learning Circles can not meet all of people’s needs. We discussed three other possible types of group support at various times:

Peer groups for friends carrying out a ministry or leading: Cleveland Friends Meeting (<http://clevelandfriendsmeeting.org/>) offer groups to provide ongoing support and help with discernment for Friends carrying out a ministry or following a leading. The focus person presents something about her/his experience in carrying out a ministry or leading. The group prayerfully listens and, as prompted by the Spirit, asks questions to help presenters explore more deeply their relationship to, awareness of, and response to the Divine in carrying out their service.

Circles of Trust similar to those offered by Parker Palmer (see ‘A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life,’ 2004, John Wiley & Sons and <http://www.couragerenewal.org/programs/circle-of-trust>) are spiritual support groups for integrity and trust, to rejoin soul and role, reconnect who we are with what we do, and live with the questions.

Philosophy café: Gatherings of varied and interesting people (not limited to Quakers) with flexible time arrangements. Opportunities for people to present ideas and let idea streams form the time boundaries, leaving room for guidance of the Spirit, accidents, serendipity and creativity.

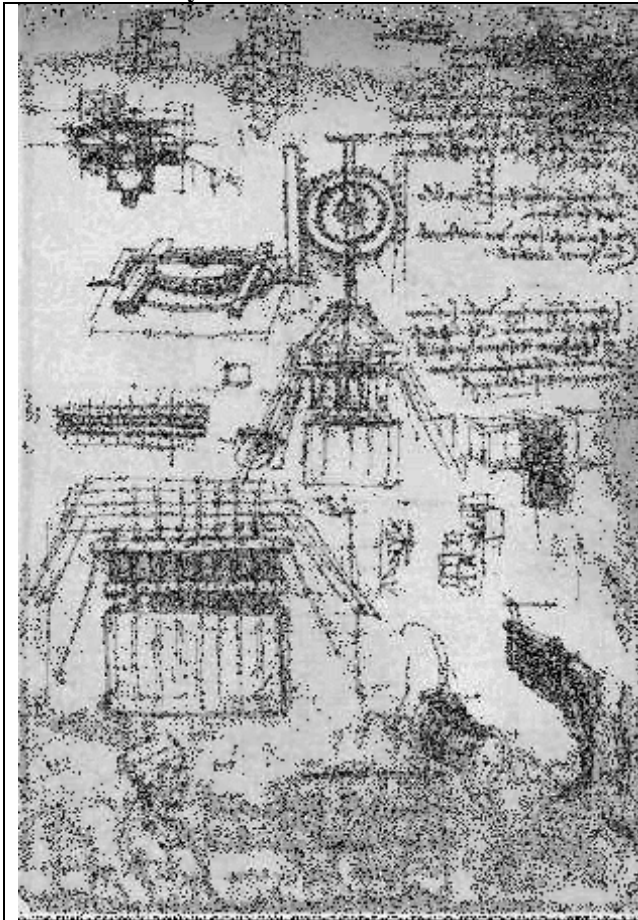
Learning Circle facilitators feel moved to offer learning circles. Others may wish to organise other forms of support; or needs could be framed as learning circle projects.

Suggestions for 2009

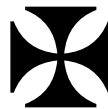
“Because QLC creates a place where people studying/ learning/experiencing their own field of inquiry can come together and gain the benefits of a group, [we] hope the QLC concept grows.” We wish to maintain the current format and structure, with small improvements to create *“a safe place among Friends where we can be open and explore our concerns on a deeper nurturing level.”* Suggestions were:

1. That more people be involved. *“It’s a very valuable way of us knowing each other in the things that are eternal.”*
2. Enough time for conversation to emerge from silence and merge back to silence. *“More time for each focus person to go deeper.”*
3. *“With smaller numbers it worked better; so small groups seem desirable.”* Membership of each circle should be no more than 8.
4. Three friends who participated in the 2008 learning circles and have previous relevant experience feel ready to facilitate, so we can have up to three circles during 2009.
5. Keep to the stated agenda including the ‘reflective questions’ format as much as possible, with about 20 minutes per focus person and a short silence between turns.
6. Facilitator and others assist people to form their needs into a learning project during the first few meetings, or as needed.
7. Remind ourselves of our purpose at each meeting.
8. Offer support to sustain a focus on learning to answer *“What canst thou say?”*
9. Timetable:
First Sunday of each month, 11:20 – 2:30 at Wahroonga Meeting House;
Tuesday following First Sunday of each month, evening (time to be advised) at Wahroonga Meeting House
10. Calendar: First Sundays in
February: Open meeting to plan 2009 Quaker Learning Circles
March, April, May, June: learning circles
July: Open ‘show and tell’ day
August, September, October, November: learning circles
December: Combined day to reflect, evaluate and plan.
11. Seek opportunities to share these projects with others, such as Quaker Learning.
12. Quaker Learning Circles *“should be closed, and from the very first meeting.”*
13. Use the bell to call us to mindfulness rather than merely mark the time.
14. Give some attention to the continuing development of our listening and responding skills (not sure how to achieve this).
15. A copy of this report be offered for posting to the Quaker Learning Australia website at www.qla.quakers.org.au

Exhibit 4: Story



Leonardo da Vinci was commissioned by Ludovico Sforza to make a huge bronze statue of the late Duke of Milan on horseback. Unfortunately Leonardo somehow decided to prance off and make what seemed like endless annoying studies of horses, and worst still he got further side tracked by his interest in perfecting the casting technique required to make the statue. He thus missed all his deadlines and the statue was never finished. When France invaded Italy, the bronze was finally turned into canons and put to use for its intended association with military strictness and precision. Sforza lost the horse that never was while the whole world gained from Leonardo's side tracks.



*Take time to learn about other
people's experiences of the light
(Advices and Queries 5).*

Appendix 1: Agenda

Quaker Learning Circles usually meet for 2 to 3 hours once each month.

Refreshments: Members bring refreshments to share during the meeting. It is accepted courtesy to eat or drink during the conversation or while another is speaking. We do not suggest breaking for a meal in the middle of the meeting.

Silence: Participants share silence for a couple of minutes.

Agenda Confirmation: The facilitator confirms that participants agree on the agenda. The timekeeper allocates time for each item and participant.

Round Table: This is the heart of the learning circle. Each participant is allocated about twenty minutes for their time as focus person. In not more than 5 minutes each focus person answers the 4QR questions:

Project: What is the title or one-line description of my learning project?

1. *Intend:* What did I intend to do since the last circle?

2. *Act:* What did I actually do since the last meeting?

3. *Observe:* What did see, observe, experience since the last meeting?

4. *Reflect:* What did I or what can I, learn from this experience?

Ask: what specific help or support can the learning circle offer to me now?

Support: For about 15 minutes participants ask questions for clarification or to ensure understanding, reflect what they have heard from the focus person, and then give support, information, suggestions or other help to assist the learning of the focus person.

Intend: The focus person says what they intend to do before the next meeting.

Wait: The next focus person waits for a short reflective silence before answering the 4QR questions.

Other items: Matters relating to the process or conduct of the learning circle, or any other business agreed to in 'agenda confirmation'.

Closure: Participants briefly share how the meeting has been for them, then share a short silence before holding hands as a circle.

(Agenda January 2009 version)

Appendix 2: Evaluation Questions

Wahroonga Local Meeting, December 2008

Please answer these evaluation questions if you have participated in more than one QLC meeting. Return to Ian by email, hand or any other route by December 31 2008.

- Please give a one-paragraph summary of your Quaker learning project and what you have learned.
- Can you comment on whether QLC helps you to answer: “What canst thou say?”
- If you had one magical wish with no constraints or limitations, what would you wish for Quaker Learning Circle (or whatever QLC might become) in 2009?
- The best thing about Quaker Learning Circle is:
- I think Quaker Learning Circle could be improved by:
- We invite you to compose a short anecdote, poem, description, cartoon or whatever to highlight or illustrate what QLC means to you. It should fit in half an A4 page (we can scan cartoons, illustrations, calligraphy or other graphics but don't run to colour printing, embedded sound or video files).

If you have any other comments, please add them.