

## New Story Subgroup #2: Emergence of Truth and Beauty

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### Community

On my coffee table at home I have a book of beautiful photographs of trees. In one of the very few texts in the book the author states that standing in the presence of an ancient tree is like a religious experience. When I read this I wanted to shout back, "It IS a religious experience!" This is one of the important insights of the New Story. Many of us have learned to label as religious only those feelings sanctioned by our religion and to not label as religious feelings of awe and the presence of Spirit in the natural world, despite the fact that most everyone is familiar with these experiences.

Tonight I'm going to talk about community and how listening is an essential ingredient for forming community. By community I include the natural as well as the human world. I'm going to claim that community is the essence of religion. We become a part of a community by listening in three ways:

- By listening to our inner teacher, a kind of moral guidance system.
- By listening to each other, which in its deepest sense means ministering to the Spirit in one another.
- And, thirdly, by listening to silence, listening to a place beyond words. There are two ways in which this kind of listening is powerful: one is listening to nature and the other is listening in company in silent worship.

This evening I want to share my personal experiences of the last kind of listening.

I am particularly drawn to listening to trees. Once you start to notice a relationship to trees, like anything else, it appears everywhere. When I was in rural Russia, I saw a woman standing with her back against a tree. She said, quite matter of factly, that she was absorbing strength from the tree and that everyone knows how to do that. I found that I can put my hands to a tree, ask a question, and expect an answer. Once when I was at a Quaker retreat center, I asked a very large tree if there was a message that I needed to bring to my retreat. I learned that this tree was very sad, because its equally large neighbor had been cut down. Science now tells us that trees and other plants are in community through their roots over very large distances. But, we have still to learn that they feel a sense of loss. When I brought this message to my retreat, however, there was little interest and no response.

I've told this story before, but it's a good story to tell again. One day I was walking in the woods with my inner teacher and my dog, who was my spiritual director. I call her that because she directed me into the woods. When my dog suddenly dashed off after a chipmunk, I paused on the path. I considered the bird who screamed out an alarm and the tree who sheltered the bird. Each thing seemed to have a purpose: the dog, the chipmunk, the bird, the tree, and the rocks that sheltered the chipmunk. And here am I standing on the path noticing all this, what is my purpose? My inner teacher let me know that my purpose is to be conscious of myself and of God because "God has an infinite longing to know itself"

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and that as I become more consciously self-aware so did God. This message gave me great joy, but it was so strange that I was unable to share it with my community.

It's experiences like these that brought me to the New Story Group. I found that I was not alone in my wonderings and intuitions. I found a community of fellow seekers and a holistic theology that has the potential to be universal.

As a Quaker I've participated in silent, expectant worship for many years, but my experience in the New Story Group gave me a new understanding of this practice. When a group of about 12 of us gathered in silence expecting to become one, I felt something like an electric shock in my brain and had a sense of transformation. Others also reported deep emotional experiences. I would describe this worship as an experience of collective consciousness. Each of us was able to have a deeper experience because we were having a collective experience. I believe that the development of a communities of collective consciousness is the future of our evolving species. We can see this, for example, in the coming together of (number) nations to work on climate change. Our task is to work intentionally on creating such communities.

## Listening

I want to tell two stories about listening and how it led me to unexpected places.

First story: I was the new clerk of New England Yearly Meeting Ministry and Counsel preparing the agenda for my first meeting. I had a 20 minute gap, but this didn't worry me because I was sure that something would come up. Part way into the meeting a person of color walked in and announced that he had something to say. This person was well known in the Yearly Meeting as a disruptive person with an unchanging agenda that most folks there had heard already, except for me. I gave him my 20 minute gap and listened. He read from a prepared statement about how he had experienced racism in the Society of Friends and particularly in New England Yearly Meeting. The members of Ministry and Counsel were not happy hearing this; one person resigned from the committee. The next day at lunch I met with a group of folks who shared this person's concern. They were mostly white parents of children of color who were worried about raising their children in the Society of Friends. That was the genesis of the so-called "Working Party on Racism" under the care of Ministry and Counsel. We did some good things.

My next story is a little harder to tell. A few years later, January, 2006, to be exact, it was no surprise that I was asked to meet with a woman of color named Sharon, who was having trouble with her meeting on the Cape. Her story was that that fall on the eve of the arrival of refugees from Hurricane Katrina to Otis Air Force Base there was a cross burning on the main road in front of the high school. She and the meeting's committee on Peace and Social Concerns immediately denounced the event as a hate crime. The rest of the meeting did not agree, and tried to suppress any statement to the contrary. It's worth noting, perhaps, that this was one of the meetings that also refused to display the *Minute on Racism* that was written by Working Party on Racism and approved by the Yearly Meeting.

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I called a meeting of all the parties concerned so that we could listen to each other. It appeared to be successful in diminishing the tensions, but very quickly the divisions arose again and more powerfully. Incidents of Sharon's "wrong behavior" continued to open wounds. Several other folks tried other interventions, but also failed to change the dynamics. That summer I was driving to the Cape almost every Sunday, as the pressure to shut Sharon out of the meeting mounted.

On this particular Sunday, Sharon decided to attend meeting for worship despite having been asked to stay away. When the clerk of the meeting saw Sharon she came out shouting. I was afraid the situation would escalate into another "incident," so I stepped in front of Sharon and said that the clerk should talk to me instead. Sharon went back to sit under the trees with her other supporters. The clerk never paused for a breath as she continued to shout at me. I felt as if I was standing in front of a firehose. I realized, as I stood there, that I had crossed the line, that neither my Quaker credentials nor my white skin protected me. I was praying for the strength to stand there, to just listen, and to say nothing. When the clerk finally stopped and went into the meeting house, I continued to stand there, shaking, for the rest of the worship hour.

It's only now, ten years later, that I am starting to understand more of what was going on there. Sharon, who was then about 50, is of mixed race, part Native American, part African American, and part White, and dark enough not to pass for white like her sister. Her misfortune was to have been raised by a White Quaker mother, so she probably never had "the talk" on how to get along with White people, on how when White people are confronted with the truth, they go crazy. Instead she was taught to speak truth to power, taught that there is that of God in everyone and that this makes us equal. Her behavior did not conform to the expected behavior for a person of color. It is racist not to understand her behavior. We need to work on this racism in the Society of Friends. The parents in my first story were right to be worried.

But my story continues, and this is the amazing part. After that meeting for worship, which we spent outside the meeting house, Sharon and some of her supporters went to lunch. We were truly a multicultural group: her African American step-father, her mother, a Wampanoag and his son, a Taino/Puerto Rican, a White member of the meeting, myself, and mixed-race Sharon. We had such a great time, laughing, shouting, and all talking at once. I never felt so free in my life before; I belonged. What had happened, I realized later, is that I had lost my white privilege, an invisible weight that never quite let me be myself. None of the workshops on racism that I have attended emphasized this idea—that it feels so good to let go of your white privilege. The bonding with people who are different from you, so hard to come by, is beautiful. This wonderful feeling did not last, of course. It exists now just as a memory and a hope for the future.

The end of the story is very sad. My intervention was no more successful than any other. Sharon was finally driven over the edge by the meeting's complete and utter rejection. She left the area. The members of the meeting who had supported her, including her mother, were read out of meeting, the Quaker form of disownment. They regrouped and formed their own meeting, which is committed to confronting racism.