

Finding the Way Forward:

The Clearness Committee as a Tool for Discernment in a Distracted World

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This packet has a number of articles we have found useful when talking about the Quaker process of corporate discernment and the "Clearness Committee." Please feel free to (a) jump around and/or read them out of order and (b) contact either of us if you have questions or would like some more conversation about actually trying to implement this practice in your context. We want to give special thanks to all those who have created this material, and to Sarah Emmer for helping to guide us to some of it.

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Useful Vocabulary and Phrases *For Understanding Clearness Committees*

Are all hearts clear? - A question asked at the end of gatherings by the clerk to make sure there is nothing left unspoken that should be offered.

Clerk - The person who convenes, facilitates, and makes sure processes proceed in good order. This person may also sum up the sense of the meeting and assign follow-up tasks if so desired.

Clearness - The state of feeling whole with an idea. Ready to move forward on a decision free from spiritual/mental confusion that the choice is right. Clearness does not always mean happiness or excitement.

Committee - A group that agrees to gather together for a specific purpose, acknowledging that the work they will undertake is grounded in listening rather than fixing. May meet one or more times.

Convener - The person responsible for finding an appropriate time and space in which committee members can meet. This person also often clerks committee meetings.

Corporate - Used in the Quaker tradition, used to describe a communal sense of knowing, decision-making, and/or a group experience.

Discernment - A process of sifting through, and of listening for rightness, of weighing options and listening to the Inner Teacher to find guidance. It is not a magic act or a means of divination. Information gathering and reason is part of this process.

Easy- To be in accord with a decision or condition.

Friends - How Members of the Religious Society of Friends refer to themselves.

Monthly Meeting (or just Meeting) - What Friends often call their congregation, *e.g.* At Meeting on Sunday I had a profound experience.

Support Committee - A committee that meets with a focus person to provide spiritual nurture, and sometimes, accountability. This is not a group therapy session.

Oversight Committee - A committee that helps to hold the focus person accountable, and remind them of ways they wish to conform their life to a particular path. Nurture is part of this oversight.

Unity - The corporate sense that those gathered have discerned some way forward. It is not unanimity.

The Clearness Committee Process

by Scott Pierce Coleman

The discernment process outlined below derives from three hundred years of Quaker faith and practice, although it is not used exclusively by Quakers in our day and age. In fact, no religious context is necessary to achieve amazing results in a clearness committee.

Why Would I Want to do a Clearness Committee?

Many people resist thinking seriously about decisions they feel unprepared to make. Perhaps unknowns prevent the decision from being framed clearly. Perhaps poor past decisions make a person reluctant to commit one way or another now. Sometimes people feel they don't know themselves well enough to make a good decision. Some people simply don't like giving up their options until the last possible minute.

When used with care, a clearness committee results in a state of inner rest that Quakers call "clarity." To be "clear" means to have reached a profoundly satisfying resolution to some difficult question. Three important qualities of well being always accompany clarity: 1) a deep sense of inner reassurance that the decision will not lead to regret; 2) a feeling of release from emotional burdens associated with the decision; and 3) an increased sense of strength to persevere through the challenges of carrying out a decision.

Obviously, people make major decisions all the time without relying on a clearness process, and good, clear decisions can certainly be reached without one. But difficult decisions can be seen from surprising and refreshing new angles when one gathers one's community together to face them. Corporate wisdom and insight often reveal dimensions of a decision not visible when contemplated in isolation.

To What Kinds of Decisions Can Clearness Committees Usefully Be Applied?

A clearness committee is designed to be a practical tool, shedding light on concrete questions such as:

- "Is graduate school the right next step, or should I spend some time working first?"
- "Should I stay in Greensboro next year?"
- "Of the job possibilities I'm looking at, which one will be best for me?"

The process can also be powerfully applied to deeper matters like, "What fears about my future have I not yet addressed?" or "Where will the strength to do this work come from?" Clearness

committees can be used to address purely personal questions as well, such as "Is my current romantic relationship right for me?"

How Do I Set Up a Clearness Committee, Once I've Decided to do One?

Before beginning, a few technical terms require explanation. The person seeking clarity is referred to as the "**Focus Person**." People who gather to help the focus person find clarity are called "**Discerners**." One of the discerners, known as the "**Clerk**," calls the group together, takes note of questions and observations during committee meetings and keeps time for the group.

A sound clearness process involves three major steps.

Step One: Self-Reflection (Done by the Focus Person)

Frame the question on which you seek clearness as fully as you can. For some folks, it can be useful to write a few paragraphs, tracing the threads of your life leading to your clearness question. For others, it may be sufficient to make some notes about relevant facts and background information so other members of the clearness committee have a context in which to help you consider your question. Once you have selected a clerk, it is helpful to discuss the question with him or her to further sharpen its focus.

Step Two: Selecting Committee Members (Done by the Focus Person)

A clearness committee is usually composed of three to five discerners and the focus person. You may find it useful to call together a slightly larger group, but beyond a certain size, the group loses its sense of intimacy and focus. As you think about whom to invite, keep in mind several key characteristics to look for:

Personal knowledge of you

Wisdom and groundedness about life

A sense of trust between you

Openness to all possible outcomes of your discernment process

A capacity to listen deeply

It is very important NOT to invite discerners who have a personal bias about what course of action you should take. They will not be able to be fully present on your behalf. It is also important to invite people of diverse ages, backgrounds and relationships to you. This leads to deeper listening in almost all cases. Sometimes people who don't know you well, but who are able to listen deeply may be more effective than close friends who know what you "should" do or whose fears keep them from being fully present to you.

Sometimes the most "obvious" people—the names coming to mind first—aren't necessarily the ones who will be the most helpful. Some people make a list of all who come to mind as possibilities (allowing for some who *don't* seem so obvious). They then make time to sit quietly with the list to see which names "rise to the top." Some people select a clerk first or speak to a staff person familiar with clearness committees and discuss options for other discerners with this person. Be open to names that keep coming to mind, but seem like a stretch.

Once you have settled on several discerners, you'll need to ask one to be clerk. Having someone else keep track of time and take care of arrangements for the group to meet (finding a place, negotiating a time, etc.) may feel uncomfortable, or seem unnecessary. But the committee's purpose is to gather on your behalf, and releasing you from having to manage these details is an important element of supporting you in your discernment.

***NOTE:** Please consider asking a veteran of clearness committees to clerk (SEE LIST AT BOTTOM). It might also be a good idea to give a copy of these guidelines to any of your discerners who have never participated in a clearness committee before.*

Step Three: Calling the Committee Together (Done by the Clerk)

Once one of your discerners agrees to be clerk, that person then takes responsibility for finding a mutually comfortable time and place for the committee members to meet with the focus person. If you've done some writing to provide your discerners with context for your question, then the clerk should distribute your notes to the other members of the group in advance of the meeting.

Clearness committees usually meet for about an hour-and-a-half to two hours. It's best to leave two hours available, even if no one expects all the time to be used. If the allotted time is insufficient to the focus person's needs, he or she can request a second meeting.

The clerk should plan to arrive fifteen to twenty minutes early, in order to center him/herself and prepare the meeting space. If all do not know one another, the clerk should invite introductions and a bit of personal sharing.

The clerk begins the meeting by reviewing the clearness process with the rest of the group:

1) An opening period of silence, in which discerners orient themselves to the well-being of the focus person and to listening inwardly for themselves, while the focus person seeks inner space to best articulate his/her question (approx. ten minutes)

2) The offering of the clearness question and its context, by the focus person (approx. five to ten minutes)

3) An opportunity for discerners to ask clarifying questions of a factual nature about the clearness question and its context (approx. five minutes)

4) A period of silent reflection in which the members of the committee consider what the focus person has said, including what they hear *behind* the focus person's words (approx. five minutes)

5) Asking reflective questions, as discussed in detail below.

At this point, the committee moves into its main work, occupying the rest of the meeting time. In an atmosphere of silence conducive to inner listening, discerners offer questions to the focus person, which the clerk writes down. Commonly, a fair amount of time will pass between questions, allowing the focus person to consider each one with care. Allowing space between questions also gives discerners a chance to make potential connections between their own reflections and a particular question that's just been asked. It's amazing how often a single question in a clearness process can focus the entire group's discernment and open up an important area of consideration.

A clearness process assumes deep wisdom within the focus person and that the person has within them answers needing to be discerned or discovered. Thus, it is important for discerners to ask questions rather than make statements. The group is gathered to support the focus person make his or her own clear decision, not to persuade him or her to make a decision that feels clear to a particular discerner. When a discerner has a clear statement emerge within him or herself, silent waiting will almost always reveal a way in which the statement can be phrased as a question. Keep in mind that questions also should be designed not to lead the focus person to a particular conclusion, but to consider a new point of view. Discerners' questions should be as open-ended as possible and should arise from the discerner's deep listening both to the focus person and other discerners as well as to one's own deepest wisdom.

Avoid explaining the reasoning behind a question as much as possible so that the focus person can see it from his or her own perspective. For similar reasons, imaginative, intuitive questions, though they may seem surprising at first, can often reveal a hidden aspect of the question, even though they may not make sense at first. (For example, "What color does that feel like?" or "If you picture the options before you as animals, what would they be?") Finally, a good discerner raises questions gently with a humble, listening heart, but is not afraid to ask difficult questions.

The focus person is free to respond to any question asked, or not, as he or she feels comfortable. Responses from the focus person can help the discerners direct their own reflections more closely to the focus person's needs, but aren't always necessary. When the focus person does decide to respond, keeping those responses brief but informative is helpful. If the focus person begins to ramble, the clerk should gently call him or her back to the question just asked. Likewise, if a discerner goes off on a tangent, the clerk is responsible to call the group gently back to center.

How Do I Know When Clearness Has Been Reached?

While it is hard to describe exactly, a group generally feels a shift in energy as resolution settles within them. Questions fall away and a group will often become silent and more deeply quiet. There will be a sense of relief or release or peace, even if the "answer" is "it isn't time to know yet." It is the clerk's job to say something like, "I have a sense we've come to some clarity about this issue. Does it seem that way to you?" Sometimes a group has a sense of being done for the time being, whether or not clarity can be articulated. Sometimes a group has the sense the focus person has everything needed to make the decision and merely needs to sit with the options a little while longer, or will know when the time comes to make the decision. Whatever the "results," the focus person generally has a sense of being able to let go the worry of indecision and live more freely in whatever answer arises.

How Might I Think of a Clearness Process as Explicitly Spiritual?

For Quakers, a clearness process is seeking God's guidance. An underlying assumption of the process is that we hear God better as a group than as individuals, as each of us listen within for the still small voice. As the group centers in the beginning and gets in touch with their care for the focus person, it is appropriate also to pray for the person as well as to ask God to clear away any blocks to hearing divine guidance within individuals or the group. Consciously adding God as a participant in the process anchors the process and the decision in a larger framework of meaning. You may also ask the group to end by holding you in prayer, either silent or vocal.

Possible Letter Sent by Convener to those who will be Help in Discernment

Dear **{names of Clearness Committee participants}**,

As we gather on **{day}** for **{focus person}**'s Clearness Committee, since we don't all use words the same way and might not be familiar with the practice of a Clearness Committee, I thought it might be helpful for us to be assured that we have a similar sense of the object and process of this activity before starting. To that end the attached is excerpted from an article I have used when participating in Clearness Committees in the past. Some of you may be familiar with its "guidelines" already, but please read through it for review. These are the guidelines I will be attempting to convene from and I'll be relying on each of you to be in a process of frank self-assessment and listening throughout the process.

Just to confirm, we will be meeting **{where}** at **{when}**. Our meeting will run for at least two hours but no more than three. We will wrap up before **{time}**. The document attached states that the last 20 minutes may be opened for "mirroring." Near the end of the meeting is also an appropriate time in the process to offer **{focus person}** the option of asking us questions, so during the last 20 or 30 minutes, we will set both of these options forth for **{her/him}** to choose as Spirit leads. The last five minutes will be set aside for celebratory affirmations and centering worship.

I look forward to our gathering around **{focus person}** and assisting **{his/her}** discernment process. Please feel free to call with any questions or concerns (or driving directions) prior to our meeting.

Sincerely,

{Convener/Clerk of Clearness Committee}

Clearness Committee “Guidelines”

excerpted from “The Clearness Committee: A Communal Approach to Discernment” by Parker Palmer

...The meeting begins with the clerk calling for a time of centering silence and inviting the focus person to break the silence, when ready, with a brief summary of the issue at hand. Then the committee members may speak – but everything they say is governed by one rule, a simple rule and yet one that most people find difficult and demanding: **members are forbidden to speak to the focus person in any way except to ask honest, open questions.** This means absolutely no advice and no amateur psychoanalysis. It means no, “Why don’t you...?” It means no, “That happened to me one time, and here’s what I did...” It means no, “There’s a book/therapist/exercise/diet that would help you a lot.” Nothing is allowed except real questions, honest and open questions, questions that will help the focus person remove the blocks to his or her inner truth without becoming burdened by the personal agendas of committee members. I may think I know the answer to your problem, and on rare occasions I may be right. But my answer is of absolutely no value to you. The only answer that counts is one that arises from your own inner truth. The discipline of the Clearness Committee is to give you greater access to that truth – and to keep the rest of us from defiling or trying to define it.

What is an honest, open question? It is important to reflect on this, since we are so skilled at asking questions that are advice or analysis in disguise: “Have you ever thought that it might be your mother’s fault?” The best single mark of an honest, open question is that the questioner could not possibly know the answer to it: “Did you ever feel like this before?” There are other guidelines for good questioning. Ask questions aimed at helping the focus person rather than at satisfying your curiosity. Ask questions that are brief and to the point rather than larding them with back ground considerations and rationale – which make the question into a speech. Ask questions that go to the person as well as the problem – e.g., questions about feelings as well as about facts. Trust your intuition in asking questions, even if your instinct seems off the wall: “What color is your present job, and what color is the one you have been offered?”

Normally, the focus person responds to the questions as they are asked, in the presence of the group, and those responses generate more, and deeper, questions. Though the responses should be full, they should not be terribly long – resist the temptation to tell your life story in response to every question! It is important that there be time for more and more questions and responses, thus deepening the process for everyone. The more often a focus person is willing to answer aloud, the more material he or she, and the committee, will have to work with. But this should never happen at the expense of the focus person’s need to protect

vulnerable feelings or to maintain privacy. It is vital that the focus person assumes total power to set the limits of the process. So the second major rule of the Clearness Committee is this: **it is always the focus person's right not to answer a question.** The unanswered question is not necessarily lost – indeed; it may be the question that is so important that it keeps working on the focus person long after the Clearness Committee has ended.

The Clearness Committee must not become a grilling, a cross-examination. The pace of the questioning is critical – it should be relaxed, gentle, humane. ...Do not be afraid of silence in the group – trust it and treasure it. When silence falls...it may well mean that the most important thing of all is happening: new insights are emerging from within people, from their deepest sources of guidance.

From beginning to end of the Clearness Committee, it is important that everyone work hard to remain *totally attentive* to the focus person and his or her needs. This means suspending the normal rules of social gatherings – no chit-chat,...no joking to break the tension, no noisy and nervous laughter to indicate that we “get it”. We are simply to surround the focus person with quiet, loving space, resisting even the temptation to comfort or reassure or encourage this person, but simply being present to him or her with our attention and our questions and our care. ...

The Clearness Committee should run for the full time allotted. ...About 20 minutes before the end of the meeting, the clerk should ask the focus person if he or she wants to suspend the “questions only” rule and invite committee members to mirror back what they have heard the focus person saying. If the focus person says no, the questions continue, but if he or she says yes, mirroring can begin, along with more questions. “Mirroring” does not provide an excuse to give advice or “fix” the person... Mirroring simply means reflecting back the focus person's own language – and body language – to see if he or she recognizes the image, and with each mirroring the focus person should have a chance to say, “Yes, that's me...”, or, “No, that's not...” In the final 5 minutes of the meeting, the clerk should invite members to celebrate and affirm the focus person and his or her strengths. This is an important time, since the focus person has just spent a couple of hours being very vulnerable. And there is always much to celebrate, for in the course of a Clearness Committee people reveal the gifts and graces that characterize human beings at the deepest and best.

...A good clearness process does not end – it keeps working within the focus person long after the meeting is over. The rest of us need simply to keep holding that person in the Light, trusting the wisdom of his or her inner teacher.

The Clearness Committee: A Communal Approach To Discernment

Parker J. Palmer

Many of us face a dilemma when trying to deal with a personal problem, question, or decision. On the one hand, we know that the issue is ours alone to resolve and that we have the inner resources to resolve it, but access to our own resources is often blocked by layers of inner "stuff"—confusion, habitual thinking, fear, despair. On the other hand, we know that friends might help us uncover our inner resources and find our way, but by exposing our problem to others, we run the risk of being invaded and overwhelmed by their assumptions, judgments, and advice—a common and alienating experience. As a result, we often privatize these vital questions in our lives: at the very moment when we need all the help we can get, we find ourselves cut off from both our inner resources *and* the support of a community.

For people who have experienced this dilemma, I want to describe a method invented by the Quakers, a method that protects individual identity and integrity while drawing on the wisdom of other people. It is called a "Clearness Committee." If that name sounds like it is from the sixties, it is—the 1660's! From their beginnings over three hundred years ago, Quakers needed a way to draw on both inner and communal resources to deal with personal problems because they had no clerical leaders to "solve" their problems for them. The Clearness Committee is testimony to the fact that there are no external authorities on life's deepest issues, not clergy or therapists or scholars; there is only the authority that lies within each of us waiting to be heard.

Behind the Clearness Committee is a simple but crucial conviction: *each of us has an inner teacher, a voice of truth, that offers the guidance and power we need to deal with our problems.* But that inner voice is often garbled by various kinds of inward and outward interference. The function of the Clearness Committee is not to give advice or "fix" people from the outside in but rather to help people remove the interference so that they can discover their own wisdom from the inside out. If we do not believe in the reality of inner wisdom, the Clearness Committee can become an opportunity for manipulation. But if we respect the power of the inner teacher, the Clearness Committee can be a remarkable way to help someone name and claim his or her deepest truth.

The Clearness Committee's work is guided by some simple but crucial rules and understandings. Among them, of course, is the rule that the process is confidential. When it is over, committee members will not speak with others about what was said and, equally important, will not speak with the focus person about the problem unless he or she requests a conversation.

Normally, the person who seeks clearness (the "focus person") chooses his or her committee, with five or six trusted people who embrace as much diversity among them as possible in age, background, gender, and so on.

The focus person writes up his or her issue in three to five pages and sends this document to members of the committee in advance of the meeting. There are three sections to this write-up: a concise *statement of the problem*, a recounting of *relevant background factors* that may bear on the problem, and an exploration of any hunches the focus person may have

about *what's on the horizon* regarding the problem. Most people find that by writing a statement of this sort, they are taking their first step toward inner clarity.

The committee meets for three hours—with the understanding that there may be a need for a second and even third meeting at a later date. A clerk (facilitator) and a recording clerk (secretary) should be named, though taping the meeting is a good alternative to the latter. The clerk opens the meeting with a reminder of the rules, closes the meeting on time, and serves as a monitor all along the way, making sure that the rules are followed with care. The recording clerk gives his or her notes to the focus person when the meeting is over.

The meeting begins with the clerk calling for a time of centering silence and inviting the focus person to break the silence, when ready, with a brief summary of the issue at hand. Then the committee members may speak—but everything they say is governed by one rule, a simple rule and yet one that most people find difficult and demanding: *members are forbidden to speak to the focus person in any way except to ask honest, open questions*. This means absolutely no advice and no amateur psychoanalysis. It means no "Why don't you...?" It means no "That happened to me one time, and here's what I did..." It means no "There's a book/therapist/exercise/diet that would help you a lot." Nothing is allowed except *real* questions, honest and open questions, questions that will help the focus person remove the blocks to his or her inner truth without becoming burdened by the personal agendas of committee members. I may think I know the answer to your problem, and on rare occasions I may be right. But *my* answer is absolutely no value to you. The only answer that counts is one that arises from your own inner truth. The discipline of the Clearness Committee is to give you greater access to that truth—and to keep the rest of us from defiling or trying to define it.

What is an honest, open question? It is important to reflect on this, since we are so skilled at asking questions that are advice or analysis in disguise: "Have you ever thought that it might be your mother's fault?" The best single mark of an honest, open question is that the questioner could not possibly anticipate the answer to it. "Did you ever feel like this before?" There are other guidelines for good questioning. Ask questions aimed at helping the focus person rather than at satisfying your curiosity. Ask questions that are brief and to the point rather than larding them with background considerations and rationale—which make the question into a speech. Ask questions that go to the person as well as the problem—for example, questions about feelings as well as about facts. Trust your intuition in asking questions, even if your instinct seems off the wall: "What color is your present job, and what color is the one you have been offered?"

Normally, the focus person responds to the questions as they are asked, in the presence of the group, and those responses generate more, and deeper, questions. Though the responses should be full, they should not be terribly long—resist the temptation to tell your life story in response to every question! It is important that there be time for more and more questions and responses, thus deepening the process for everyone. The more often a focus person is willing to answer aloud, the more material the person—and the committee—will have to work with. But this should never happen at the expense of the focus person's need to protect vulnerable feelings or to maintain privacy. It is vital that the focus person assume total power to set the limits of the process. So everyone must understand *that the focus person at all times has the right not to answer a question*. The unanswered question is not necessarily lost

—indeed, it may be the question that is so important that it keeps working on the focus person long after the Clearness Committee has ended.

The Clearness Committee must not become a grilling or cross-examination. The pace of the questioning is crucial—it should be relaxed, gentle, humane. A machine-gun volley of questions makes reflection impossible and leaves the focus person feeling attacked rather than evoked. Do not be afraid of silence in the group—trust it and treasure it. If silence falls, it does not mean that nothing is happening or that the process has broken down. It may well mean that the most important thing of all is happening: new insights are emerging from within people, from their deepest sources of guidance.

From beginning to end of the Clearness Committee, it is important that everyone work hard to remain *totally attentive* to the focus person and his or her needs. This means suspending the normal rules of social gathering—no chitchat, no responding to other people's questions or to the focus person's answers, no joking to break the tension, no noisy and nervous laughter. We are simply to surround the focus person with quiet, loving space, resisting even the temptation to comfort or reassure or encourage this person, but simply being present with our attention and our questions and our care. If a committee member damages this ambiance with advice, leading questions, or rapid-fire inquisition, other members, including the focus person, should remind the offender of the rules—and the offender is not at liberty to mount a defense or argue the point. The Clearness Committee is for the sake of the focus person, and the rest of us need to tell our egos to recede.

The Clearness Committee should run for the full time allotted. Don't end early for fear that the group has "run out of questions"—patient waiting will be rewarded with deeper questions than have yet been asked. About twenty minutes before the end of the meeting, the clerk should ask the focus person if he or she wants to suspend the "questions only" rule and invite committee members to mirror back what they have heard the focus person saying. If the focus person says no, the questions continue, but if he or she says yes, mirroring can begin, along with more questions. Mirroring does not provide an excuse to give advice or fix the person—that sort of invasiveness is still prohibited. Mirroring simply means reflecting the focus person's language—and body language—to see if he or she should have a chance to say, "Yes, that's me" or "No, that's not." In the final five minutes of the meeting, the clerk should invite members to celebrate and affirm the focus person and his or her strengths. This is an important time, since the focus person has just spent a couple of hours being very vulnerable. And there is always much to celebrate, for in the course of a Clearness Committee, people reveal the gifts and graces that characterize human beings at their deepest and best.

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

The Clearness Committee is not a cure-all. It is not for extremely fragile people or for extremely delicate problems. But for the right person, with the right issue, it is a powerful way to rally the strength of community around a struggling soul, to draw deeply from the wisdom within all of us. It teaches us to abandon the pretense that we know what is best for another

person and instead to ask those honest and open questions that can help that person find his or her own answers. It teaches us to give up the arrogant assumption that we are obliged to "save" each other and learn, through simple listening, to create the conditions that allow a person to find his or her wholeness within. If the spiritual discipline behind the Clearness Committee is understood and practiced, the process can become a way to renew community in our individualist times, a way to free people from their isolation without threatening their integrity, a way to counteract the excesses of technique in caring, a way to create space for the spirit to move among us with healing and with power.

Clearness Committees and Their Use in Personal Discernment

Jan Hoffman, New England Yearly Meeting

A clearness committee meets with a person who is unclear on how to proceed in a keenly felt concern or dilemma, hoping that it can help this person reach clarity. It assumes that each of us has an Inner Teacher who can guide us and therefore that the answers sought are within the person seeking clearness. It also assumes that a group of caring friends can serve as channels of divine guidance in drawing out that Inner Teacher. The purpose of committee members is not to give advice or to "fix" the situation; they are there to listen without prejudice or judgment, to help clarify alternatives, to help communication if necessary, and to provide emotional support as an individual seeks to find "truth and the right course of action." The committee must remember that people are capable of growth and change. They must not become absorbed with historical excuses or reasons for present problems, but rather focus on what is happening now and explore what could be done to resolve it.

In a monthly meeting, persons may ask Ministry and Counsel (Worship and Ministry, Overseers) to form a clearness committee. The focus person may also choose the committee, gathering five or six trusted friends with as much diversity among them as possible. In either case, formation should be under a discipline of worship, taking care that people are chosen not just because they are friends, but through some discernment process. Note that the process is always initiated by the person seeking clearness, though a friend may ask, "Would a clearness committee be helpful?" When the committee meets it should be for two to three hours with the understanding that there may be a second, and even third, meeting.

A clerk and recorder should be appointed. The clerk opens the meeting, closes it, and keeps a sense of right order in between, making sure that agreed-on guidelines are followed, and that everyone who wishes to speak may do so. (While these tasks are assigned to the clerk, anyone may intervene to ensure that the guidelines are followed.) The clerk also sees to physical details which will nurture an atmosphere of seeking silence: seeing that everyone has a comfortable chair, turning off any telephones, and making sure the space is enclosed and a 'do not disturb' sign is up if interruptions are likely. The recorder writes down the questions asked and perhaps some of the responses, and gives this record to the focus person after the meeting.

In advance of the meeting, the focus person should write up the matter on which clearness is sought and make it available to committee members. This should be identified as precisely as possible: relevant background factors should be mentioned; and clues, if any, about what lies ahead should be offered. The exercise is valuable not only for the committee members, but especially for the focus person.

A meeting begins with the clerk inviting the committee to prepare for its work, reminding everyone of the guidelines to be followed and making sure there is a common understanding of the degree of confidentiality about the meeting. After this, all settle into a period of centering silence. When the focus person is ready, s/he begins with a brief summary of the question or concern. The discipline for committee members is very simple—but difficult to follow: members may not speak in any way except to ask the focus

person a question, an honest question. That means no presenting solutions, no advice, no “Why don't you...?”, no “My uncle had the same problem and he...”, no “I know a good book/diet/therapist that would help you a lot.” Nothing is allowed except honest, probing, caring, challenging, open, unloaded questions! And it is crucial that these questions be asked not for the sake of the questioner's curiosity but for the sake of the focus person's clarity. Caring, not curiosity, is the rule for questioners. Remember that your task is to serve as a channel for the Light to help the focus person clarify his or her inner truth; neither you nor the committee deals directly with the problem or makes the decision.

Committee members should try to ask questions briefly and to the point rather than larding them with a lot of background and qualifications. Not only does this help guard against turning questions into speeches, but it may also help open the focus person to some insight that gets obscured when the questions wander. Committee members should also trust their intuitions. Even if a question seems off the wall, if it feels insistent, ask it.

The focus person normally answers the questions in front of the group—and the response generates more questions. But it is always the focus person's absolute right not to answer—either because s/he does not know the answer, or because the answer is too personal or painful to be revealed in the group. The more often a focus person can answer aloud, the more s/he and the committee has to go on. But this should never be done at the expense of the focus person's privacy or need to protect vulnerable feelings. When the focus person does answer, it is good to keep this response relatively brief so time remains for more questions and responses. Some questions seem to require one's whole life story in response: resist the temptation to tell it!

Do not be afraid of silence in the group. In fact, value it, treasure it. The pace of questions and answers should be gentle, relaxed, humane. A machine-gun pace of questioning or answering destroys reflectiveness. If there is silence in the group, it does not mean nothing is happening. It may very well mean the most important thing of all is happening, inside of people.

Well before the end of the session, following at least an hour of questioning, the clerk should ask for a pause and ask the focus person how s/he wishes to proceed. This is an opportunity for the focus person to choose a mode of seeking clarity other than questions, which have characterized the rest of the session. The recorder continues to record during this time. Possibilities are:

- a. silence out of which anyone can speak under the same discipline as that in other meetings for worship;
- b. silence out of which people share images which come to them as they focus on the focus person;
- c. the committee continues with more questions;
- d. the committee is asked to reflect on what has been said;
- e. the committee is asked to affirm the focus person's gifts;
- f. the focus person may ask questions of the committee.

Before the session ends, any clarity reached can be shared, if the focus person wishes to do so. S/he and the committee should agree on next steps. If another meeting seems right, it

should be scheduled at this time. It may be that the focus person will reach clarity and no further action is necessary. Or it may be clear that a support committee or an oversight committee should be appointed to aid the person in keeping clear and/or in being accountable to the clarity reached. Members of the clearness committee are free to release themselves from further commitment or to offer to serve on such committees.

The clearness committee works best when everyone approaches it in a prayerful mood (which does not exclude playful!), affirming the reality of each person's inner guidance and truth, and the Spirit's capacity to strengthen and sustain. We must give up the notion that we know what is best for another person and simply try, through prayerful listening and speaking, to help remove anything that obscures their inner light.

These notes compiled by Jan Hoffman from her experience and the following sources: Parker Palmer at a conference on Solitude and Community; Faith and Practice of Pacific Yearly Meeting (1985) pp. 58-60; and Living With Oneself and Others of New England Yearly Meeting Committee on Ministry and Counsel (1985) pp. 50-55.

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