

The Fruitful use of Silence

Jim Platts

Real understanding lies beyond words. So too much use of words gets in the way of achieving real understanding. The Quaker way of doing business is founded on a deeply meditative listening process, honed over centuries and taught person to person, seeking to find what is needed in any and every situation and seeking to find how to do it correctly. The paper describes the essential features of this approach and how it is operationalised.

Learning to listen

In his detailed analysis of societies which have created significant human growth, McClelland¹ notes that, in all cases, people from religious backgrounds which develop a highly internalised awareness of and a relationship with God stand out compared to those who externalise and ritualise their religious practice. It might be deduced that the intensely reflective mental practices develop mental abilities which have wider value.

Hegel pointed out that the combative stage of thesis and antithesis, characterised by a destructive like-dislike polarisation and by an externalised approach to thinking which attempts to make thinking into a simple process of concrete choosing, is something which has to be survived, not indulged in, and surpassed, if the creative stage of synthesis is to be reached. The process of synthesis acknowledges complexity and involves an ability to think abstractly, to achieve a perceptive understanding of the principles involved in a situation, to recognise the necessary principles requiring to be activated to move forward and creatively to develop a response which gives those principles appropriate embodiment in action.

This progression from concrete, binary thinking to fluent abstract thought requires achieving mastery over one's emotions, so that the emotions take their proper place as messengers in the thinking process and effectively bring things to your attention, because when they are not given due attention and trained as messengers they become monsters. It is the silencing of the chattering inner voices which enables what is real in a situation to be perceived and understood, free of projected emotionality, and it is this ability to see clearly which enables both problems and opportunities to be recognised for what they are and responded to fruitfully.

All more reflective, inwardly sensitised forms of religious practice necessarily require the development of this skill and so they teach it and it is not surprising that McClelland found the productivity that he did amongst these groups. These groups learn the practice of abstract thought through intense practice in association with others who are skilled at practising it. The Quaker approach to developing this skill is deeply embodied in practice as four skills. These four skills are exactly focused on the two key stages in the creative process which Schön²³ calls Naming and Framing, each being developed as an individual competence first and then as a group competence:-

- empathic listening (*personal noticing*)
- unfreezing frozen emotions (*group noticing*)
- transcendent thinking (*personal creativity*)
- achieving insightful consensus (*group creativity*)

These can be described and exercises developed for each skill⁴, but they are only truly developed in the presence of others who know how to do it and help the learner practise. The four skills have been embodied into Quaker business practice as four steps, each of which in turn operationalises one of the four skills:-

¹ D C McClelland *The Achieving Society* pp 367-73 Van Nostrand, Princeton 1961

² D A Schön *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* p 40 BasicBooks, USA 1983

³ D A Schön *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco 1987

⁴ M J Platts *The Four Skills Working Paper* Institute for Manufacturing, Cambridge 2001

- recognising a concern
- operationalising a sense of search
- achieving a sense of completion
- recording and confirming the outcome

This paper describes the four skills and the four steps and explains their functionality.

Empathic listening

Empathic listening is obviously a 'noticing' skill. Five levels of paying attention might be recognised. Here the intention is simply to describe them. How this skill is developed and used will become clear later in the paper.

Ignoring:- paying no attention, ignoring.

Pretending:- "Uhuh. Yeah. Right. Sure".

Selective listening:- hearing only parts of what is being said, hearing only those parts which are agreed with or disagreed with, drifting off, in and out of listening.

Attentive listening:- paying attention and focusing energy on what is being said, on the content.

Empathic listening:- listening with full intent to understand as deeply as possible, listening with all the senses.

Unfreezing frozen emotions

The emotions have been referred to as a signalling system. However, it is often a very blocked signalling system. Much creativity depends on noticing nuances and so providing a sensitive surfacing route for nuances is important. Difficult previous experiences leave all of us with emotionally frozen zones, where we are most unhappy to have to go. Frozen zones occur because what was being protected at that time was something precious - something about life itself that is deeply true and was not and is not negotiable, but could not be satisfactorily articulated (i.e. brought into consciousness) at that time, so it was repressed. Often the greatest growth individuals and organisations experience is when the understanding pent up in that frozen zone is recognised, properly honoured and released.

At the positive edge, allowing creativity to flow in an already creative group does not sound like a difficult task, but at the periphery of every team's comfort zone the problem is in essence the same. It is about noticing the nuances that matter – and it is precisely the nuances hidden in people's repressed zones which matter most. There is thus an issue here about team leadership. Though the degree differs, everybody has zones in which their thinking has been repressed to some degree and the mechanism of release is always the same. The emotionally frozen person is very grateful when they are offered emotional warmth, protection and understanding, and they gain confidence. But before they speak freely they will test the safety of doing so, because last time, they got hurt. They will 'test' the protection and understanding, but once they have established that they can trust it, they will start to become dependent, and will *regress* emotionally, to allow the bit of themselves which is emotionally frozen to come to the surface (for unfreezing) in some symbolic way.

On the positive edge, humour does this. Humour is a great lubricant and playfulness allows a creative group to explore 'what if' ideas in a myriad different ways, at very high speed, continuously. Here, humour is doing that warming and unfreezing task and is removing the danger of hurt from exposure, by making it completely acceptable to say outrageous things. However, humour – particularly this sort of high speed, sharp edged humour, playing outrageously with real issues where, two sentences to the left and everybody is rolling about laughing because it is so funny, but two minutes later and two sentences to the right all are utterly focused in and serious because some new possibility has just been spotted – is a far from trivial skill. It has a huge sensitivity at its core that is absolutely awake and not afraid. The key to the not-being-afraid can more easily be seen at the negative end of the scale.

The essential thing to note in the unfreezing sequence is that the application of *sensitivity* generates *trust* and then *dependence* - *which must not be betrayed*. The dependence is not permanent, but it can be quite prolonged. It is *necessary*, to get the frozen bit sorted out. It helps to understand that, in the process of unfreezing, the frozen bit has to be *exposed* (i.e. it has to be offered up, in a way that makes its owner emotionally very vulnerable and sensitive) and it is then entirely dependent for its unfreezing on the genuine warmth *coming from outside*. (And too much warmth - *heat* - can *burn*. One has to sustain the sensitivity.) The dependence will remain until the frozen part is properly unfrozen. Then there must be a careful *maturing out* of the dependency. A solid, warm relationship will certainly remain, but a falsely sustained dependency is *not* a real relationship. We might reflect that the word 'educate' comes from the Latin 'educare:- to lead forth, to bring out'. One *releases* creativity. And one then grows it by developing an environment in which the whole team (a whole organisation or even a set of organisations) grows the ability to resiliently sustain their enjoyment of each other, their protection and forgiveness of each other for slips, their stimulation of each other and most of all, their freedom to speak.

Transcendent thinking

Whereas Naming is concerned with recognition, Framing is concerned with shaping concepts. Six levels of thought process might be recognisable at this stage.

Automatic:- being reactionary to suggestions, acting from habit or routine.

Sensitive:- being receptive to and responsive to one's own and other's thoughts and feelings, and to information from the environment.

Conscious:- being aware of one's own mental facilities and intentionally using them to provide order and direction and to create desired energy and thought.

Creative:- exercising the power or ability to bring ideas into existence, being inventive with one's own and others' thinking.

Unitive:- helping develop a whole approach characterised by agreement or harmony in feelings, ideas or aims, being able to unite or focus a group's thoughts together towards a joint and higher purpose.

Transcendent:- extending beyond the limits of previous experience or abilities, crossing past boundaries or limits, acting and thinking beyond one's own needs.

What is worth noting is that this sequence fits closely with the sequence from beginner to expert outlined by the Dreyfus brothers⁵, with the difference that while the Dreyfus brothers describe the characteristics which might be visible at a particular stage, this sequence describes the thought process demonstrating that characteristic.

Achieving insightful consensus

Being actively creative as a group requires coherence and the ability to achieve insightful consensus. Consensus is when everyone, not just a majority, is in agreement. A decision made by consensus is one which everyone can honestly support. It does not mean that it is everyone's first choice, but everyone must be able to 'live' with the decision. Consensus is not just about everyone agreeing. The goal of the process is for everyone to have a chance to give their input and be heard. During the consensus decision-making process people will offer and must be encouraged to offer their opinions on the issue being discussed. There is nothing wrong with debating a topic during this process. If the process goes well, you should have a final decision that takes into account all of the observations and opinions that you have discussed. By giving room for the expression of reservations and disagreements, decisions can be revised to reflect all input.

Reaching consensus requires group members to speak up and express clearly what they believe and prefer. Those who suppress and keep quiet about genuine differences contribute to group failures variously called

⁵ H L Dreyfus and S E Dreyfus *The Power of Human Intuition and Expertise in the Era of the Computer* The Free Press, New York 1986

'groupthink', 'false consensus', 'premature agreement' or 'false unanimity'. Reaching consensus requires group members to really listen to each other. It requires group members to value and respect differences and try to learn from each other. It requires individuals to put out their ideas as 'gifts' to the group, and then let go of them. This means they care less about their own idea or position 'winning', and more about the group succeeding and finding the best path forward, without regard to who was the author of the final idea.

Oriental practice

These abstract thinking skills are taught by Quakers through what is essentially a group meditative process. In the far East all the martial arts contain similar elements of the development of alert sensitivity and responsiveness and self control. In the introduction to Herrigel's "Zen in the Art of Archery"⁶, Suzuki says:-

"One of the most significant features we find in the practice of archery, and in fact of all the arts as they are studied in Japan and probably also in other Far Eastern countries, is that they are not intended for utilitarian purposes only or for purely aesthetic enjoyments, but are meant to train the mind; indeed, to bring it into contact with the ultimate reality. Archery is, therefore, not practised solely for hitting the target; the swordsman does not wield the sword just for the sake of outdoing his opponent; the dancer does not dance just to perform certain rhythmical movements of the body. The mind has first to be attuned to the unconscious.

If one really wishes to be master of an art, technical knowledge of it is not enough. One has to transcend technique so that the art becomes an 'artless art' growing out of the Unconscious."

Quakers made manufacturing itself their 'artless art', and in the process grew civilisation into the form it currently has.

Thinking differently

Physical activity is so obvious that it seems unnecessary to say that writing and running use the muscles of the body quite differently and involve quite different co-ordination skills. It *is* necessary to say that thinking differently does involve using the brain in a different way. This is not at all trivial and it is why, in all meditative teaching traditions it is emphasised that you need a teacher, because you can't learn it from books. Thinking about something different is not the same as thinking differently. A small example illustrates the point.

The process of *seeing* involves combining two kinds of visual information, that provided by focal vision and that provided by peripheral vision. We rarely think of the difference, but it is important. Presuming that you, the reader, are reading this indoors, lift your head and focus your eyes on some small point on the far wall of the room – a small screw on a light switch, for example. Now lock your focus on to that point and without moving your eyes shift your attention to what your peripheral vision tells you about the room. Whereas your focal vision can tell you something in detail about the screw on the light switch (it is a recessed, slotted screw, for example, with a slightly domed head), your peripheral vision will give you much more general information and it will steadily give you more information the more you give it your attention. It will tell you roughly how wide, high and deep the room is and the approximate colours of particular walls and items of furniture. It communicates patterns and it will tell you the relationships between the various objects in the room. It creates your sense of space and your sense of mood and, if you will let it, it will quietly bring to your attention something which is currently out of place, or is interesting and you hadn't noticed before, or had forgotten about or about which there is a possible question or a possible creative thought. If you are in control of your thinking processes you can make a note to look at this detail later and keep paying attention to what else your peripheral attention is picking up. Most people at this point however will find that they are now looking at this detail and their eyes are no longer locked onto the screw on the light switch, nor is their attention still being given to their peripheral vision.

You do not usually think about it (i.e. it is unconscious) but your peripheral vision in fact controls your view of the world and it in turn is driven by all sorts of things which 'catch' your attention so that your eye

⁶ E Herrigel *Zen in the Art of Archery* p 5 Arkana, London 1985

flicks about all the time. But can you really call that *seeing*? Don't you think it might be of value to be able to choose whether you give your attention to your peripheral or your focal vision?

These two elements of seeing have quite different functions. Focal vision is always single point and a whole string of single points does not make a pattern. It is isolationist – it draws your attention into that single point and draws your attention away from the periphery:- what is called 'tunnel vision'. When allowed to it controls. It is an important function but it is important to be in control of it, not controlled by it. Being master of your attention means being able to choose what gets your attention. In contrast to focal vision, peripheral vision, is always holistic, is always about patterns, relationships and integration but it is also the font of sensitivity. It is the sensitivity within peripheral vision which says that something over here needs your attention and that sensitivity, if you listen to it, will also give you a ranking on the importance of what it is bringing to your attention. It may simply nudge you, reminding you of something you keep forgetting to think about. It might feed in some information which is relevant to the issue you have in focus right now (to continue our light switch example, imagine you are in the process of screwing this light switch to the wall. You are looking at one screw because you have just screwed it in, but you have just dropped the other screw. Your peripheral vision tells you that there is something looking like a screw next to your left foot. You focus on it and pick it up). It might override everything else because there is an emergency. If, for instance, something dangerous occurs and a piece of something is flying towards your head, you will have ducked and your hand will have come up to protect your head, without your focal vision ever having been brought into play. Peripheral vision doesn't get much conscious attention but it is in fact infinitely more powerful than focal vision and is its manager.

It is not just that these two components of seeing have different functions, they excite the brain in different ways, and this is where training begins to be important. In the same way that athletes exercise in particular ways to develop particular co-ordination skills, it requires effort to develop consciously the perceptive skills that peripheral vision provides. It is not only that it is peripheral vision which *notices*, it is peripheral vision which provides an understanding of relationships, sets each thing in its place in context and generates *meaning*. Focal vision is not able to do this. All it is able to do, if it is allowed to be in control, is insist that what it is looking at is the most important thing in the whole universe. What peripheral vision does is *not* what focal vision does, twice as fast. It is *different*.

Whilst focal vision – and focal thinking – mainly display beta rhythms in brain activity, the broader, deeper noticing and thinking which goes with peripheral vision corresponds to an enhancing of the more powerful, slower alpha rhythm activity in the brain and a damping down of the beta rhythm turbulence. It is not simply that people able to think at this level exhibit a calmer demeanour, that calmer external demeanour does correspond to a calmer internal demeanour as well. They are genuinely functioning differently mentally. It is further true that people who can get to great depth display more activity at the even deeper, slower and more powerful theta rhythm levels which carry the much more deeply embedded patterns of perception and behaviour normally thought of as culturally set. The beta rhythms correspond to everyday personal consciousness, the alpha rhythms correspond to a second level of consciousness that is unconscious for many people, but does not need to be, and the third level, which is normally thought of as the collective unconscious, but at which level some people can consciously operate, corresponds to brain activity at the theta rhythm level.

Given this, what is then true is that, just as music can pull a whole crowd of people into rhythm, so a group, or even an individual, exhibiting particular brain rhythms, excites resonance in others and will 'switch on' that ability in them. It is for this reason that the Sufi teacher Rumi said "all the teaching in the world is as nothing compared to half an hour in the company of those who know". Practice with those who know *is essential* to learn how to do it. It is not simply that they can direct your attention towards the right nuances in an experience, helping you become conscious of what you are experiencing:- their very presence enhances in you the mode of thinking that you are needing to experience and develop. Thinking deeply is not thinking about a different subject, it is thinking *in a different way* – and that way has to be experienced before you can understand what it is. That is why Quaker practice is important. Done properly it generates an ability to think deeply. (Like all other processes, it can get stuck, so not all Quakers think wonderfully deeply. But it does better than most.) We can list four skills that emerge and it is possible to see in all of them the increasing depth and thoroughness of process that is developed. We can also list the four steps which are used in Quaker business practice to operationalise the four skills in the everyday world. What lies behind all this is the Quaker religious practice itself, which is the teaching and learning mechanism for all these things. An extended description of this is therefore worthwhile.

Quaker religious practice

"We settle into silence. That is all there is to it. Everything comes out of the silence." Yes, that's true. But it isn't an empty silence. Quaker meetings are founded on a deeply meditative silence, contributed to and maintained by all present, out of which thoughts flow but which is entirely focused on listening. Thus it is not any old thought that flows. The chattering voice inside is stilled and you can feel the level of the meeting shift as the beta rhythms die away and the alpha and then the theta rhythms take over. No-one speaks. But somewhere in the group – and it is a group experience – somebody will be getting an element of understanding that something or other matters. More silence. Deep silence. After some time the concern which has been taking shape in that person's mind has become a coherent idea and they may find themselves registering that what they have been given is not simply a piece of understanding for them alone but they are going to have to say it. At this point the substance of the nickname of this body of people acquires its meaning. The essence of a Meeting for Worship of the Religious Society of Friends of Truth is a deep inner search process, collectively undertaken, and it is a search for guidance. No-one in these circumstances speaks lightly and no-one will ever speak willingly of their own accord and many may speak never at all. So when you have the experience of having the invisible finger placed on you that not only do you have a thought which has taken shape in your head, you are going to have to stand up and voice it, and it is not negotiable – you quake like a leaf in awe of the responsibility – and you lock on inwardly and listen desperately hard as you speak, to try and get what you have been given correct and to transmit it correctly, no more and no less. It is a common experience to find yourself on your feet speaking, not entirely knowing how you got there. But you speak briefly and sit down again. (It is also a common experience to come to meeting with a problem on your mind and to have someone you have never met stand up on the other side of the room and say exactly what you needed to be told.) More deep silence.

A little while later someone else might rise and, amazingly, what they say adds to what was said earlier. This is not a debate, this is a very deeply founded, deeply reflective synthesising process and *only* things which add to the total understanding get through the mesh and emerge from the silence. Eventually a complete understanding has been achieved, and it is always holistic. It is never fragmented and there is never any exclusion of or overriding of a minority viewpoint or a secondary issue. The Truth contains *all* details and the tiniest detail missing has the power of veto, because the understanding is less than complete and so the truth is not being honoured. The process is about reaching first principles, including all the details. It is thus a very complete process. (And it is clear why war – which is by its nature an excluding process – is never an acceptable process to Quakers.) But as it slowly emerges in everybody's understanding that the truth has emerged (and this is of course relative, but in a particular context it will be that as much understanding has been achieved today as it is possible to achieve today), people in the meeting will feel the level of the meeting rise and they will at some point know that they can surface and return to normal life. The work of the meeting has been done. At this point two of the Elders will shake hands and the meeting will rise. The pattern of the meeting is dictated by the need, not by the clock, and by the guiding presence within the silence. To repeat:- this is always a process of seeking for guidance. It is a long, long way beyond self interest.

This sounds like an unstructured and long process, but this is not true. What it is is a process that depends on depth and the observation is that a meeting which achieves the necessary depth will achieve complete understanding in an amazingly short time and with very succinct use of words. And a meeting which does not achieve the necessary depth can go on for ever but will never achieve understanding. Elders are those people who are selected because of their competence at reaching depth and the task they are asked to focus on is to act as custodians of the depth of the meeting, to make sure the meeting settles as deeply as it can and stays there as long as is necessary. In a meeting proficient at this, the Elders will never speak. But they are teaching. Their presence alone teaches what has to be taught. They teach you how to control your attention and change levels.

For people who are at that stage of development (and not everybody is) the point about the silence and stillness is that you can feel the level of the meeting change. Religious practices which involve much speech and action engage emotionally but do not change levels and can be used in a utilitarian way to 'validate' anything. A process based on listening, not talking, cannot do that and in particular a process based on listening to the place that words come from (i.e. listening to *meaning*) self protects, does not get stuck on words and lets its actions speak. It is that listening to meaning which lies behind empathic listening and lies behind the holding open of the silent space to allow understanding to enter, which

allows frozen emotions safely to unfreeze. It is the listening to meaning which again enables transcendent thoughts to take shape and enables the holding open of the wider space to allow understanding to enter which enables groups to achieve insightful consensus.

Avoiding choosing

Quakers thus sit aside from much of the 'busy-ness' of the world. Much busy-ness is an attempt to keep within the concrete world and solve by wilfulness (effort) problems which in fact have deeper roots and can only be resolved by action at a deeper level. This assertive busy-ness locks many people into materialist answers to non-material questions and makes them consumers and producers of things of no real worth. It is helpful to look at this problem before looking at a deeper process.

The Jesuit Oswald von Nell Breuning, a key figure in the development of the philosophy of industrial leadership in Germany after the second world war, pointed towards this. Here are his words of 1934⁷, with a surrounding comment by Michael Naughton, which directly speaks of the virtue of munificence⁸. Whereas husbandry is a process, munificence might be a descriptor of one of the strengths, or 'virtues', needed by someone involved in husbandry. While this is useful information, what might be noticed in this piece is a difference in emphasis between a somewhat academic Catholic focus on a slightly abstract descriptor of a personal characteristic and the very direct Quaker focus on what you do.

"Munificence, like courage, strives "for what is arduous and difficult". Whereas courage may jeopardise one's life, munificence may jeopardise one's resources. Because the virtue of munificence directs resources toward the good of the community as well as profit, the munificent person acts courageously by incurring greater financial risk. Munificence is an expression of public co-operation, incorporating both market criteria and the good of society.

Oswald von Nell Breuning calls munificence "a genuine capitalistic virtue", that is, "a virtue for the entrepreneur". He explains that only the entrepreneur who "gives first thought to service and second thought to gain" practises the virtue of munificence. Nell Breuning explains that munificence is manifested in that person

"who in his enterprise and in his means of production employs his working men for the creation of goods of true worth; who does not wrong them by demanding that they take part in the creation of futilities, or even harmful and evil things; who offers to the consumer nothing but useful goods and services rather than, taking advantage of the latter's inexperience or weakness, betrays him into spending his money for things he does not need, or that are not only useless but even injurious to him"

Products should not be produced only for the purpose of fulfilling market whims; the choice of products has an ethical and even a spiritual character that can never be reduced to simple economics."

This is fine, but wishes aren't enough. The Quaker concern is with how you do it, and with what you have to be able to recognise and handle, day by day, to be able to make progress in this matter. The process of assertion which short-circuits this deeper husbandry comes from a sense of inadequacy in the person doing the asserting and is, in fact, driven by a fear of losing control if they have to leave the zone of concrete thought and action, so they have to retain control and keep not only themselves but you also, within the bounds of the concrete zone. They do this by controlling society's thinking so that it stays in that zone. The assertion mechanism for doing this is easy. It essentially involves never letting go of control in a discussion, so that the answer is in fact a foregone conclusion. People who do this are never at risk because they never ask an open question. The mechanism of changing levels of thinking from level 1 to level 2 is of *not* short-circuiting to a prescribed form of answer but of holding open the question. As we have seen, this creates emotional strain. Control is thus the reverse of this and is focused on ensuring that only closed loop questions are asked, so that the prescribed form of answer is always achieved. A simple example illustrates this assertiveness mechanism at work.

If I want to know what colour something is and you know, if I ask "what colour is it?" I hand control of the conversation to you. I can get enthusiastic and guess "is it red?", but I have still handed control of the conversation to you. If however I say "it's red isn't it!", this is not a question. It is an assertion and unless

⁷ O von Nell Breuning *Reorganisation of Social Economy* p 116 Bruce Publishing, 1936

⁸ M Naughton Who Managers Become when they Manage: the Importance of Virtue in Management *Journal of Applied Manufacturing Systems*, 3, (1), 27. 1994

you actively contradict me I will proceed on the understanding that it is red. And if it turns out not to be, I will be angry with you because you said it was red (because you didn't say it wasn't).

This is a fairly simple example. A more subtle example of assertiveness at work is the practice of focusing discussion on a detailed issue *past* the generic issue, which has the subtle effect of inserting my choice on the generic issue into your thought process. I do this by framing the language you will think in before you start to think. If I ask "do you want a red one or a blue one?", I am pushing you past the question of whether you want one at all and unless you actively push me back and assert that you don't want one (and you will be asked, in an incredulous tone, to prove why you don't want one, because "surely you must!"), you will end up with either a red one or a blue one. Assertiveness is the opposite of sensitivity.

Choosing (trapping people into choosing) is the control mechanism of utilitarianism. If you can be persuaded that happiness comes from choosing this *or* that one, then you have accepted that happiness can be resolved by the consumption of material goods and you will never proceed to a deeper level of perception and a deeper level of maturity. It has been said, quite correctly, that consumerism is built on the marketing mechanism of making you feel insecure and then selling you something which appears to ease the insecurity but in fact doesn't. It maintains it, because it has established in you a willingness to accept suggestion, i.e. it has created a dependency. It has in fact weakened you as a person, not strengthened you. The Quaker view understands this. This is de-meaning.

Quaker business practice

This is not the Quaker approach. At the centre of the Quaker understanding of manufacturing is the appreciation that right manufacturing includes understanding what *not* to manufacture. One of the simplest things about mastery is the hardest to achieve. You have only achieved mastery over a tool when you are able to put it down. If you are so in thrall to your tool that you cannot put it down, then it is master of you. You are not master of it. It focuses us on the meaning of the word *sacrifice*, which concerns what you hold on to, not what you let go if. This shapes the Quaker approach to manufacturing and has caused deeply reflective approaches to be developed which sustain sensitivity in business practice. Concerning the Quaker business process, it assumes:-

- there is a correct answer – and it might include doing nothing
- it is holistic – i.e. it involves all aspects in an integrated way, it denies nothing its existence
- it can be found by a process of sensitive seeking and careful synthesising
- it requires the four skills
- so it requires operationalising the four skills
- there are four steps involved in doing so:-

recognising a concern
operationalising a sense of search
achieving a sense of completion
recording and confirming the outcome.

Central to this whole approach is the Quaker understanding of what a 'concern' is. In Quaker terminology, a 'concern' is not a worry. A 'concern' is a task laid upon you from above you in the world of intent (given to you internally). It is brought to your attention for you to realise it (bring it down into everyday reality - make it real). Quakers use the word 'concern' to designate a 'given' task, just as the word 'calling' is used to denote a 'given' job. It therefore goes without question that when you are 'given' a 'concern' (and recognising this is an inner perception) you will be given the wherewithal to carry the concern through and you do not need to doubt it, although it also goes without question that you will have to operationalise all your abilities to reach the starting point of what has to be done. There is thus much care given to distinguishing the nudgings of a concern from the twitterings of a 'good thought', however good that thought may be. Someone might then be referred to as 'operating under concern', or as 'carrying a concern'. They are then moment by moment operating under guidance and it goes without saying that continuous prayer and inward listening underpin the doing of the task.

Recognising a concern

So how do you recognise a concern? For most people, the word ‘concern’ carries a negative ring to it, i.e. it is about something wrong that needs correcting. However, this is simply a matter of perspective. If you notice an opportunity for something to be improved, this carries equal weight as a concern. Viewed from the potential end state, it is equally something wrong that needs correcting. It is something not yet right, which needs doing. A concern is thus not about positive or negative in this emotional sense, it is about *rightness*. But more than that, it is about *growth*. It is about seizing opportunities for people’s growth and removing hindrances to their growth.

However, it is more than that. A concern is not an egocentric wish of any kind. It is a genuine inner noticing of the significance of some little detail and a recognising that it could be better *and should be better*. It is about doing the right thing and doing things right, emerging from that umbrella of sustained intent to *notice* what is right and to *do* it. It is thus founded on the first skill of empathic listening. As a practice it requires sustaining consciousness in that second level of thinking, with attention always being directed towards the third level in the attitude of a servant always ready for the next instruction. This sustained inner attentiveness we call having an awake conscience, and conscienciousness is the corresponding characteristic observable in the action. It is, as the Bible puts it, about ignoring the noise of the wind and the fire (i.e. not being swayed by the emotions and in particular avoiding emotional projection) and listening for the still, small voice.

When the sensitivity is there, the still, small voice is capable of waking you up in the middle of the night and it is insistent. It doesn’t go away. This is because, at the level of the Work of Creation, there is one fundamental law which those in the work understand. Those who can see *must do*. Because those who *can’t* see *can’t* do. And it is a steady experience, as has been outlined above, that if it *is* right, *you will* somehow find the things you need coming to you, so that it can happen, provided you will trust and walk towards it. This doesn’t happen in the same way with a personal wish. It is thus said - from experience – “the Truth is its own advocate”.

Throughout this process, things are true because they are true, not because anybody said so, i.e. the *only* reference point is truth itself. There is thus no confusion of power with truth. The process carefully eliminates any process whereby power – including the power of emotion – can take control. Emotions are clearly respected as messengers and thereby are not mistaken for masters. The dangers are not only emotional power. It is also a fault of Academia that it tends to work by precedent – by who said it before you did – and also by style – are you using the approved vocabulary for saying what you are trying to say. Both these are filters which have the effect of controlling the *content and thereby the outcome*, by controlling *the language of communication*.

Because sensitivity is given weight over precedence, and listening over speaking, the Quaker process sustains a receptive, non-judgemental atmosphere (it *assesses* what has been said – which is not the same as *judging* it) and so it is possible for a new, emergent need to be sensed, named and responded to as a matter of course, not as something special. The same is true for a new potential for growth (a need is always a potential for growth) – and thus the Quaker approach is very creative of growth. The whole process is a process of husbandry. The following example gives the flavour of it.

Chocolate isn’t perhaps an obvious manufacturing material but by the end of the 1800’s chocolate companies (Cadbury’s, Rowntree’s, Fry’s, all Quaker) were illustrating what *work* can mean in a positive, human development sense, and what good leadership in industry can do. Apart from model factories and innumerable stories of personal care of their workforces⁹, the Cadburys built Bourneville and the Rowntrees New Earswick, whole (and wholesome) new towns for their workforces. But more. There was still the Quaker concern with social wellbeing and still the Quaker meticulous analytical methodicalness. One Sunday in February 1895 Seebohm Rowntree visited the slums of Newcastle-upon-Tyne with a man who knew the district well. He was shattered by the experience. When he got home he wrote “the sense which remained with me after that night was that there is an overpowering amount of work to be done”. Carefully, he took two years over a study of poverty in York and in 1901 published “Poverty – A Study of Town Life”. That work was a model for all social research since. In one forceful passage he says¹⁰

“A family upon the scale allowed for in this estimate must never spend a penny on railway fare or omnibus. They must never go into the country unless they walk. They must never purchase a halfpenny newspaper or

⁹ I C Bradley *Enlightened Entrepreneurs* pp 120-155 Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1987

¹⁰ Friends Education Council *Seebohm Rowntree* (pamphlet) p.4 London 1990

spend a penny to buy a ticket for a popular concert. They must write no letter to absent children, for they cannot afford to pay the postage. They must never contribute anything to their church or chapel, or give any help to a neighbour which costs money. They cannot save, nor can they join a sick club or a Trade Union, because they cannot pay the necessary subscriptions. The children must have no pocket money for dolls, marbles or sweets. The father must smoke no tobacco and must drink no beer. The mother must never buy any pretty clothes for herself or for her children, the character of the family wardrobe being governed by the regulation, *nothing must be bought but that which is absolutely necessary for the maintenance of physical health, and what must be bought must be of the plainest description*. Should a child fall ill, it must be attended by the parish doctor; should it die, it must be buried by the parish. Finally, the wage-earner must never be absent from his work for a single day.”

He went on to lead other employers in York to eliminate deep poverty within the city. As to the profit from the company itself, the Rowntree Trusts (which were the custodians of the majority of the Rowntree shares until forced to distance themselves from the company by the Charities Commission in the 1980's) have been one of the largest independent sources of funding for social research in the UK for a century.

Operationalising a sense of search

As Seebom Rowntree's example illustrates, to have the first inkling of a concern is one thing. To get a clear picture of the totality of a concern, complete with all its details, is a different matter and requires an active process of sustained search. This is far more than an individual task in that everybody available will have a sensitivity to some aspect or other and, given time, may be able to identify some important detail that nobody else would be aware of, but you will not know what that detail is if you do not give it space in which to surface. So you must create that atmosphere – create the space for that insight to emerge in. It is founded on a very clear understanding that nine tenths of an answer is not an answer. An *answer is complete*, i.e. it is holistic. All the details matter and it is achieved by synthesis. No-one, no thing, no detail, however small, is marginalised or forgotten. So the silent space to hear nuances is not only allowed but sustained. And all aspects are *assessed*, not criticised. This is not a debate to be won it is a truth to be understood. So it takes as long as is necessary, but it actually depends on the *depth* of the exercise, not the duration. This is a *Naming* process (i.e. a noticing process) in a very complete sense.

Achieving a sense of completion

Without adequate depth there will never be completion, because there will never be a complete understanding of what the problem is and what has to be done. Completion means that all the fundamental issues have been recognised, down to and including all the fundamental issues which only appear in some small detail but are nevertheless present, all the relationships between all these fundamental principles have been recognised so that an understanding has been synthesised of the totality of the problem *and understanding has progressed to an understanding of the fundamental principles which have to be present in the answer*. It is then possible to move.

At this point, all the detail will not have been assembled concerning *how* to move, but a sense of awareness has been achieved that it will be *possible* to move, because all the elements that have to be present in the answer are now recognised and the relationships between them are understood. At a conceptual level therefore, the answer is complete. That the principles have to be embodied in some practical plan and that plan turned into action is a different issue and all are aware of that, but for the present all are aware that all has been found that can be found. All the guidance that has been given has been received and for the moment there are no more inner nudgings. There will be further developments and insights to come concerning implementation but these will not affect the basic structure of what has been understood. The process can thus move on.

Recording and confirming the outcome

In a Quaker business meeting there isn't a Chairman, there is a Clerk, and the task of the Clerk is to focus the meeting's attention on the matter in hand until a minute recording the complete understanding of the issue, and the agreed actions, *has been written and confirmed within the meeting*. This is a very powerful practice and represents the understanding that nine tenths of an answer is not an answer in the context of achieving real functionality from a meeting. No minutes are ever written up afterwards from a Quaker meeting. The process of developing the minute receives the same meditative attention as was given to the evolving of the understanding of the problem.

Again, it is a process of seeking the truth, but this time it is seeking how to embody it correctly:- firstly how to embody what has been understood in words that properly convey the meaning and secondly to record its implication for action. Note that this is not the same as recording who said what. That is not a completion process. This process remains a synthesising process, again based on deep listening, but it is synthesising and shaping action. To use Schön's description, it is a Framing process in contrast to the earlier Naming process.

As before, it starts with one person and proceeds to involve the whole group. The Clerk of the meeting is supported in silence as he or she finds words to succinctly record what has been understood and what is to be done about it. When the Clerk feels they have a clear minute capturing the understanding, they read the minute to the meeting. It is allowed to stand in the silence. All the sensitivity present is involved in the inner checking process. Any incompleteness, even if it is only a nuance, will be sensed by someone, who will name what is missing or incorrect and perhaps suggest an amendment. More silence is allowed, until all improvements have been sensed. The Clerk is supported again in silence to find revised words to achieve a complete minute. The revised minute is shared with the meeting. When the minute stands in the silence and is sensed as complete, the meeting can move on.

Always an inner reference

What is notable throughout the Quaker process is the constant use of – the constant returning to – an inner reference point. It is precisely because the Quaker approach emerged as a reaction to the *abuse* of power that it is so sensitive about guarding against the seduction of power (Power tends to corrupt. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.) and is thus *absolutely* a way of *sacrifice* (i.e. holding to a way of finding first principles and giving them embodiment in life.) and *this is not negotiable*. Unlike many earlier approaches, however, where the place for such a process was in retreat from the world (e.g. in the seclusion of a monastery), the place for this for Quakers was, and remains, *in the world*. Thus, spirituality which is not grounded in action *is not complete*. Hence the completeness of the process. (and hence the *continuous* listening. Part of a Quaker is *always* listening.) And time and energy is set aside for *full attention* listening. Here is the American Quaker Rufus Jones (1863-1948) who was for many years Professor of Philosophy at Haverford College, Pennsylvania, writing about his own upbringing to this approach¹¹.

“While I was too young to have a religion of my own, I had come to a home where religion kept its fires always burning. We had very few ‘things’, but we were rich in invisible wealth. I was not ‘christened’ in a church, but I was sprinkled from morning to night with the dew of religion. We never ate a meal which did not begin with a hush of thanksgiving; we never began a day without ‘a family gathering’ at which mother read a chapter of the bible, after which there would follow a weighty silence. These silences, during which all the children of our family were hushed with a kind of awe, were very important features of my spiritual development. There was work inside and outside the house waiting to be done, and yet we sat there hushed and quiet, doing nothing. I very quickly discovered that something real was taking place. We were feeling our way down to that place from which living words come, and very often they did come. Some one would bow and talk with God so simply and quietly that He never seemed far away. The words helped to explain the silence. We were now finding what we had been searching for. When I first began to think of God I did not think of Him as very far off. At a meeting some of the Friends who prayed shouted loud and strong when they called upon Him, but at home He always heard easily and He seemed to be there with us in the living silence. My first steps in religion were thus *acted*. It was a religion which we *did* together. Almost nothing was said in the way of instructing me. We all joined together to listen for God, and then one of us talked to Him for the others. In these simple ways my religious disposition was being unconsciously formed and the roots of my faith in unseen realities were reaching down far below my crude and childish surface thinking.”

Precisely because it is beyond words, this approach transcends cultural and linguistic barriers.

In conclusion

About the silence - it comes *first*, not second. The process is about getting *the understanding* – which is *beyond* the words – so there has to be time *within the thought process* – for the words to fade away and the understanding appear. Focusing on the silence not the words is focusing on *the meaning behind the words*.

¹¹ Para 91 *Christian Faith and Practice* London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, London 1960

It takes time to digest the words and get to the meaning. Therefore allow that time. On the face of it the process thus *appears* to be slow – but it thereby achieves a high signal to noise ratio. It is thus a highly effective process, with high communication efficiency (communication efficiency meaning the genuine development of understanding). It is thereby in fact fast. The avoidance of haste achieves speed.

The whole of this paper is summarised in the story of the king's new clothes. The truth is its own advocate. Something is true because it is true, not because somebody important said so. The latter involves assertiveness. The former involves sensitivity. The reason for the assertiveness is an insecure sense of self, whereas husbandry is about growing that sense of self.

This paper began by talking about different levels of thinking and pointing to the importance of moving beyond the concrete to look at the abstract and to seek to understand and work with the principles that lie behind everyday reality. It has ended by emphasising that this principle has to be applied to language itself, and that throughout, the process of making what is fundamentally correct tangible in everyday life is what *work* is. Here is George Herbert (1593-1633)¹², showing his own understanding of the what, the how and the why of this road, and asking his Maker's help in travelling it.

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in anything
To do it as for thee.

A man that looks on glass,
On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,
And then the heaven espy.

All may of thee partake;
Nothing can be so mean,
Which with this tincture 'for thy sake',
Will not grow bright and clean,

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine;
Who sweeps a room as for thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine.

This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold;
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for less be told.

Jim Platts

Jim Platts spent 23 years in industry, was a Partner in the consulting engineering practice Gifford and Partners 1981-6, Managing Director of Composite Technology Ltd 1986-9, and is now a lecturer in the Institute for Manufacturing at the University of Cambridge. His interests are design and manufacturing, particularly skill based manufacturing, and a concern for ethical leadership.

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¹² Hymn 652 *Songs of Praise* Oxford University Press 1931