

Clearness Committees and Their Use in Personal Discernment

By 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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