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Number 68

# What Canst Thou Say?

**Friends • Mystical Experience • Contemplative Practice**

*You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this: but what canst thou say?  
Art thou a child of Light and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest,  
is it inwardly from God? —George Fox*

## Silence and Music

### The Silence Sings

Faith Paulsen

This warm Sunday morning, sunshine flows through many small windowpanes into the meetinghouse. Light brushes across the dark wooden benches, spilling onto the floorboards, illuminating the still faces that greet me, eyes cast inward, ears tuned to silence, as I tiptoe into meeting for worship. Outside, cicadas chirp. Children whoop in the playground. I take my seat on the bench.

A whole hour of silence intimidates me, even as it calls to me. Silent worship is a challenge. There's so much busy-ness and noise around me and chatter inside my head. Without that soundtrack, I don't know how to fill the time.

In the Protestant church I grew up in, music filled Sunday morning service. My father was the church organist and choir director. I sang in the children's choir, delighting in anthems like "Jesus Loves Me" and "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." My brother and sister and I each did our time sitting on the big organ bench, turning the pages while Dad wrapped his arms around the Widor Toccata or Handel's Messiah or the Benediction, Stainer's Sevenfold "Amen." Simply by being all around me, hymns and psalms provided a kind of vocabulary of prayer for me.

As an adult, I learned other kinds of sacred music. Through my Jewish husband, I discovered the grand simplicity of the *Shema*, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One." I was moved by the Mourners' Kaddish, a response to death that does not even mention

death, but praises "the name of the Holy One, Blessed be he, beyond all blessings and hymns." From other cultures, we learned to love Indian Kirtan music, African Gospel and so much more.

So perhaps it is ironic that at the same time, we started attending Quaker meeting. Quakerism is a powerful way for my husband and me to share the places where our traditions come together. We also joined a weekly silent meditation group affiliated with the meeting.

#### **From the Guest Editor:**

*For many years I made a living as a professional musician, including singing in church and synagogue choirs, conducting those choirs, and doing a little composing. Eventually, for me prayer was music. I knew no other kind until I met my first Quakers about 15 years ago. Then there was no music at all during worship. I loved it.*

*Lately I've been feeling again the sharp pleasure religious music gives me. I've been listening to spirituals, and a choral piece in Hebrew which blends in the Latin mass at the end and makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up, and I've been remembering what I used to do for and with people by singing. At the same time, I continue to go so, so deep through silent waiting worship. I really need to understand the difference between worshipping through silence and worshipping through music, because the musical more-than-half of my life calls to me sometimes, and the Quaker way calls all the time. I've been feeling it as a choice, that I need to know which is my road now and to stop feeling pulled by both. So I suggested "Silence and Music" for our theme in order to hear what others had to say about it.*

(cont'd p. 3)

Barbara Clearbridge (shulamith eagle)

My husband and I are both attracted to the unprogrammed meeting—its open-endedness and the sincerity of spontaneous messages and, of course, the people. But it is sometimes a struggle for me to leave home, abandon my second cup of coffee and Sunday newspaper, and push myself to meeting. And when I get there, I often fidget and glance at my watch, waiting for someone to speak. The silence seems to me like an empty space waiting to be filled.

And so, in the hushed meeting-house I sit, try to still my mind, and wait, wait, wait for someone to rise, to share a message, a personal story or surprising metaphor that fills the silence with meaning. I listen to the sounds of people shifting in their seats, the shuffling of feet.

A man clears his throat. I wait, but he does not rise to speak.

The ceiling fan whirs. The breeze lifts my hair from my forehead. The cicadas' song rises to a crescendo. The space of the hour seems so wide and vast. It seems to vibrate with the breaths of generations who have sat here before me. Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. Outside the window, a bird weaves a piece of straw into a nest

she is building in the rafters of the meetinghouse.

And then I hear it: the silence itself breathing. I inhale, and when I exhale, the silence vibrates like a psalm. I hear echoes of my father's organ music, I hear voices chanting the *Shema, Kaddish*, Gospel and Kirtan. In the silence, I touch the Source of the music "beyond all blessings and hymns."

With a start, I realize—I am no longer waiting for someone to speak. The silence is no longer absence of sound. It is alive and vibrant with a message just for me, and the message is that silence is to music as inhale is to exhale. That music vibrates on the edge of silence. I just couldn't hear it, until I sat still enough—and long enough—to hear the silence sing.

*Faith Paulsen's writing has appeared in Literary Mama, Wild River Review, A Cup of Comfort For Parents of Children With Special Needs, A Cup of Comfort For Mothers, and two upcoming collections: A Cup of Comfort For Couples and Chicken Soup For the Soul: Shaping a New You. She and her family attend Gwynedd Friends Meeting, Pennsylvania. Some of her favorite programs at Gwynedd include the Spiritual Book Club, Group Spiritual Guidance, Quaker Writers Group and weekly Meditation Group.*

## Singing a New Song

Mary Kay Glazer

When I was young, maybe around ten years old, I learned—very painfully—that I could not sing. I was sitting in a circle with a group of girls and a few adults—some sort of summer day camp. We were singing, and as we sang, we took turns singing into a tape recorder microphone. The singing was then played back so we could hear ourselves. When my voice crashed out of the little box, everyone (it seems, in my memory) laughed, made fun of the voice, and said, "Who is that???"

After decades of not singing, or singing only in my own company, or singing as quietly as possible when with others, I was quite surprised—and dismayed—when it seemed that God was asking me to sing hymns as vocal ministry in meeting for worship. I resisted for a long, long time. I think at first I thought I must be mistaken in my discernment. I certainly hoped so! Then, when the call persisted, I became afraid.

That, of course, did not stop God. Regularly in meeting for worship I felt the impulse to stand and sing. Each time, I declined the invitation—until the wedding of a dear friend. With me for almost the entire meeting for worship was a hymn. Near the end of worship, with a lot of fear and trembling, I finally stood, not knowing if my voice would freeze, if anything at all would come out of my mouth, if it would sound more like croaks and creaks than music. Not knowing until I opened my mouth and started to sing. There were some creaks, but no one gasped in horror. I don't know much about how this hymn of love was received. I only know that when I finally said yes, I felt that I was faithful, that I had done what God had asked, and I felt a sense of freedom—fear too, still, but also freedom.

**What Canst Thou Say?** is an independent publication by and for Quakers with an interest in mystical experience and contemplative practice. It is published in August, November, February, and May. The editorial and production team is Lissa Field, Mariellen Gilpin, Lieselotte Heil, Richard Himmer, Judy Lumb, Patricia McBee, Grayce Mesner, Mike Resman, and Eleanor Warnock.

Please write for WCTS! Instructions to authors are on page 5. Send editorial correspondence to <mariellen.gilpin@gmail.com> or WCTS, 818 W. Columbia, Champaign, IL 61820. See the WCTS website for a history of WCTS and updated queries for future issues: <whatcanstthousay.org>

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## Listening in Harmony

Barbara Clearbridge (shulamith eagle)

Since then, I have been given other songs, mostly hymns, to sing as ministry in worship. I have not been particularly happy when that happens, but it has become a bit easier to say yes. Even when I am not asked to sing as ministry, songs of praise and worship are often in my head and on my heart during worship, and at other times, too. Music—along with silence and movement and conversations with God—is part of my inner prayer, in my day-to-day moments as well as in meeting for worship. I find that is a way back to prayer when other ways are blocked, for instance when I get too analytical or tangled up in trying to find just the right words in prayer; or when I get too distracted in my efforts in silent prayer. It is a way for me to tap into and express joy and praise in the Spirit, something that feels right but is hard for me to do. Singing releases a spiritual energy that brings me deeper into the heart of God. There is a freedom in song that is different from the freedom I find in the silence.

The sacred music in my life has not replaced the sacred silence of Quaker worship. God still invites me into the silence, and still opens me in the silence. God still uses words without music to speak to me, and sometimes no words at all. The music, like other forms of prayer, is just one way that God opens my heart to God's presence.

Sing a new song unto the Lord (*Judith* 16:13, *Revelations* 5:9)...

God has given me a new song to sing, and the singing of it has opened me to new healing, new Love, new Life—and a cherished way of worship. This musical way of worship, rather than replacing silent worship, enhances my relationship with the Eternal One. Music and silence feel integrated into the one flow of the Spirit in and through me. One leads to the other to the other to the One, so that it is all “the breath of the Spirit flowing in me.”\*

Thank you, oh Holy One.

*Mary Kay Glazer lives in Ticonderoga, NY, and attends the Ticonderoga Worship Group and Middlebury, VT Monthly Meeting. She is a graduate of the School of the Spirit Spiritual Nurture Program and Shalem Institute's Spiritual Guidance Program. She is a spiritual director and retreat leader.*

\*from the song, “Spirit of God”  
by Miriam Therese Winter

A few years ago I was singing with an unusual choir. Anyone who wanted to could come and sing. There were usually between 10 and 15 of us. The music was uplifting, spiritual or positive or appreciative, but not schmaltzy or gooey; it was lively, fun and beautiful. A few things were actually arranged in parts, but most of it was songs with several melody lines. For example, one used a variation of the Native American chant: “Beauty all around me, beauty all above me, beauty all below me, beauty all within me.” There was a main melody line and several alternate melodies. We would begin in unison, then the altos would start a different melody, then the tenors, then the sopranos. Eventually we had parts and counterpoints and descants. Usually there was a drum accompaniment, and once in a while a flute. Eventually some of us would branch off into whatever we liked, just jamming.

Then one evening, the quality of the corporate listening required for this kind of singing reminded me of meeting for worship. We were singing a song with at least three different melody lines. As we wove around each other we were listening to each other and to ourselves, and to the sound as a whole. Sometimes we were suddenly singing softly; other times we grew great with volume. Then the song seemed to be ending and the listening grew so acute, so entire, as each one strove to do the right thing vocally, to grow or diminish or stop or change harmony to end, or begin again...we finished so perfectly together, held our last note into a hum, which then disappeared, and there was silence. The joy that washed over me was visceral; every cell was in bliss.

It seems to me that such corporate listening, such acute attention for the voice of God, such total bonding with each other as we listen in harmony, is the secret to having gathered and covered meetings.

*Barbara Clearbridge, known to F/friends as shulamith eagle, attends Middlebury Friends Meeting in Vermont.*

(cont'd from p. 3) ... *I've come to the conclusion that worship through music is body prayer. It vibrates our cells, dances our bodies. It's emotional. It can uplift our spirits, help us feel our joy or our serenity, or work loose and free us of despair, or send us flying up with the angels. It can bring a profound experience, but its effects wear off.*

*Worship through silence is prayer of the mind. It quiets our thoughts so we can hear the still, small, voice. Then God can vibrate our cells. It can include emotion. It can lead to a conversion experience: electrifying insight or an experience of God's presence. One rises up after that a different person.*

*I think some of us flourish with body prayer, some with mind prayer, and some of us need both. I thank God for the grace of having found the silent way when I needed it.*

*Barbara Clearbridge (shulamith eagle)*

# Gitanjali: Song Offerings

Rabindranath Tagore

III

*I know not how thou singest, my master! I ever listen in silent amazement.  
The light of thy music illumines the world.  
The life breath of thy music runs from sky to sky.  
The holy stream of thy music breaks through all stony obstacles and rushes on.  
My heart longs to join in thy song, but vainly struggles for a voice.  
I would speak, but speech breaks not into song, and I cry out baffled.  
Ah, thou hast made my heart captive in the endless meshes of thy music, my master!*

VII

*My song has put off her adornments.  
She has no pride of dress and decoration.  
Ornaments would mar our union;  
they would come between thee and me;  
their jingling would drown thy whispers.  
My poet's vanity dies in shame before thy sight.  
O master poet, I have sat down at thy feet.  
Only let me make my life simple and straight, like a flute of reed for thee to fill with music.*

XIX

*If thou speakest not I will fill my heart with thy silence and endure it.  
I will keep still and wait like the night with starry vigil and its head bent low with patience.  
The morning will surely come, the darkness will vanish,  
and thy voice pour down in golden streams breaking through the sky.  
Then thy words will take wing in songs from every one of my birds' nests,  
and thy melodies will break forth in flowers in all my forest groves.*

LVIII

*Let all the strains of joy mingle in my last song—  
the joy that makes the earth flow over in the riotous excess of grass,  
the joy that sets the twin brothers, life and death, dancing over the wide world,  
the joy that sweeps in with the tempest, shaking and waking,  
all life with laughter, the joy that sits still with its tears on the open red lotus of pain, and  
the joy that throws everything it has upon the dust, and knows not a word.*

**Rabindranath Tagore** (1861-1941) was from India, a contemporary of Gandhi. Tagore wrote music and lyrics, poetry, stories and plays, both mystical and secular. He wrote in Bengali and translated his own work into English.

## ***Discovering God as Companion: Real Life Stories from What Canst Thou Say?***

Mariellen Gilpin, Editor

*“DISCOVERING GOD AS COMPANION* underlines the power of ‘we’ sustained by the Religious Society of Friends for more than 350 years. Contributing Friends and companions of God have drawn so close to the Source of Love that Light streams through their written words into the world. Through the testimonies of these writers, readers can glimpse contemplative witness as one mark of the whole Quaker community.” —Judith Favor’s review in *Friends Journal*

Retail \$15.34, 172 pages Available from FGC Bookstore <quakerbooks.org> (800) 966-4556

## Gifts Meant To Be Shared

Sally Campbell

I am so glad that I became a Quaker after Friends came to accept and even appreciate messages that come in the form of song. I read that Herbert Hoover's mother was read out of meeting when she sang her father's favorite hymn at his memorial meeting. (Fortunately another nearby meeting took her in.)

What would I do with these lovely gifts I've been given if I could not sing them in meeting? At FGC Gathering in 1982, I not only found myself saying, "I'll be faithful to you, God, all my life," but I began writing songs, which was a complete surprise. I could not carry a tune, learn the piano or understand musical notation, but here were songs coming out of me. The first one, inspired by a tee-shirt with a winking Quaker, was "Hug a Friend."

One day at Morningside Meeting a few years later, a couple of longtime attenders arrived with their new baby, the first child who'd been in the meeting in years. That day the first line of a song was there for me when I sat down, and the whole song was complete in time for me to rise and sing it during meeting. Appropriately it is called, "Give Us This Day a Gentle Song."

In 1990 at FGC Gathering we unfolded sections of the AIDS quilt to honor and grieve so many dear Friends lost to that epidemic. In the deep FLGC worship afterwards, I was comforted by yet another new song, "Elements of Love." It begins "The water of Love will ease us through our grieving" and ends "We will sing new songs of joy. We will lead new lives of peace."

Though these are the three times I felt most clearly that I was given a song in meeting, I have written many more songs over the years and have sung them in and out of meeting. Recently I gave a sermon to Mennonites, telling about my experience of being a Quaker by telling stories and singing some of my songs. I hoped to leave them with one thing I had learned: if we allow it, the Spirit will give us the most wonderful and surprising gifts that are meant to be shared.

I'm so glad Quakers are now open to accepting the gifts of song we have been given. As yet another of my songs says:

*Rest in the Silence, trust in the Silence  
For from the Silence your true song will come  
And when you hear it, sing from the Silence  
Bring from the Silence the song to be sung*

*Rest in the Spirit, trust in the Spirit  
For thanks to the Spirit your song will be sung  
And as you sing it, the Spirit sings with you  
The song and the Silence and Spirit are one.*

*Sally Campbell is a member of Morningside Meeting, New York City. She is a singer and songwriter and professional organizer of people's stuff.*

## First Day

Shery Dameron

*Branches stirring light,  
leaf silhouettes dance,  
birds sing inborn hymns  
formed before first breath.  
From the children's room  
faint strands of  
"This little light"  
softly infuse the meeting.  
Worship comes,  
still as a breath  
drawn in silence.*

**Shery Dameron** attends Inland Valley Meeting in Riverside, California.



## Tell Us Your Stories!

**What Canst Thou Say** is a worship-sharing group in print. We welcome submissions of articles of 350-1500 words and artwork—line drawings or artwork suitable for black and white reproduction. Please send your text submissions in Word or generic text format and artwork in high resolution jpeg files. Photocopied art and typed submissions are also accepted. Send via email to <mariellen.gilpin@gmail.com>, or diskette or hard copy to **WCTS, 818 W. Columbia, Champaign, IL 61820.**

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## *Distraction During Worship: A Conversation with an Editor*

*Sylvia:* Even though I'm a musician, I find music to be a distraction in meeting for worship. It seems to stand in the way, between God and me. Otherwise, music is one of my greatest interests—I listen very deeply to it. Crazy? Maybe.

*Mariellen:* I have the same experience—when I'm in worship, music distracts me from God. I thought it was because I come from a long line of musically-challenged forebears. Now that someone as musical as you also declares music a distraction in worship, I am looking around for another explanation for what you call craziness—I prefer to call it an individual difference. Maybe it's because for me, music is a mood-creator, and the composer's intended mood is not often what I need in order to think deeply in the presence of God about my questions and issues.

But talk about individual differences! Here's one that has developed in the last few years: white noises around the house...the hum of the microwave, the refrigerator, my air pump (for helping me breathe through the night), the neighbor's air condi-

tioner, traffic on a distant highway in the early morning stillness—have you ever noticed that a white noise usually has some sort of cycle and a particular range of sound frequencies? As I go about my household chores, I'm often repeating some prayer-word. Recently I find that I am chanting inwardly a sort of tuneless tune made up of my prayer-word recited to the rhythm and frequency of the closest white noise. Shades of my un-musical father, whose rendition of “Mairzy doats and dozy doats” (Mares eat oats and does eat oats) was not readily distinguishable from that of “Onward Christian Soldiers.” I hope God is pleased by the odor of my prayers (mostly prayers of adoration) if not by the sound.

*Sylvia Spotts is a member of Columbia Meeting, Missouri, and has taught music performance for many years. She is also a poet, and sometimes meeting and yearly meeting newsletters include a poetic offering from her.*

*Mariellen Gilpin's piano teacher told her mother, “Don't waste your money on any more music lessons for her.” She loves to correspond with Friends about the spiritual life.*

There's nothing like a song to give us the key to get out of prison. I have noticed that a song can heal me as well as any spiritual technique. When I hit such a healing space in a song, I sometimes sing that part several times and can feel it opening me up at deeper levels.

—Dalton Roberts  
(from an article originally published as a newspaper column, “My Sunday Journal,” distributed by International Press Service)

## *Messages of the Spirit*

*Andrea Anderson*

My first truly worshipful experience was many years ago when I attended a silent meeting for worship with Friends in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was the silence that spoke to my inner being—no scripture reading, sermon or music—just a silent group of people from whom occasionally a spoken message was given. Following that first meeting for worship I knew where to find my spiritual home.

It is true that music can speak to one's soul in a way that no words can, and that feeling can linger with one for a long time and be comforting. And with that thought I must admit that occasionally, with trepidation, I have broken the silence of worship with a song.

Silence and music are opposites in relation to sound. How often in our busy lives do we experience real silence? There are always industrial, mechanical, natural and human sounds that we just learn to ignore. Likewise with music. How often do we pay close, deep attention to some music so readily available to us on radios, TV, CD players or live? It is fortunate that we have these forms of music available as entertainment pastimes, but we often miss the true value of the deep meaning and benefit of music.

With that, I thank God our creator for both silence and music, both of which are ways to experience messages of the spirit.

*Andrea Anderson is a member of Downers Grove Meeting in Downers Grove, Illinois. When Friends there want to sing, they ask Andrea to play the piano for them. It is part of her testimony to write in the phonetic alphabet, out of a concern to make it easier for children to learn to read and spell.*

## The Eloquence of Silence

Silence is the eloquence through which deepest truth is revealed. The intellect is limited. It too often muddies the waters of clear perception and clouds the basic clarity which is the birthright of the mind. The Zen teacher would say that truth cannot be expressed in words and concepts, and when we try to do so we have lost it.

Bricks make a strong house, but we don't brick up the doorways, we leave a space. Fine china makes a lovely teapot, but the usefulness of the pot is in the space within. In the case of the doorway and teapot, it is the empty space that makes them available to us. So it is with the silence of the mind. It is in the stillness and space that the Spirit can do its greatest work.

The deepest spiritual insights are wordless. A Friend called one morning to say that in meditation that morning she had had an overwhelming awareness of the reality of the Inner Self, the God Within. Her voice was filled with awe. The awareness was accompanied by a certainty, an understanding that could not be disputed, yet there were no words with which to express what had transpired. Her experience was hers alone, and there was no way I could participate in its unique expression. A wordless knowing, an indisputable clarity of understanding—such is the eloquence of the mystical experience. It speaks to something deep within us, and we are never quite the same.

*Andrea Anderson contributed this quotation from the 1982 Jonathan Plummer Lecture by Betty Clegg, of Downers Grove Meeting, Downers Grove, Illinois. It was recently reprinted in Among Friends, the newsletter of Illinois Yearly Meeting.*

## WCTS Needs a New Treasurer

The WCTS team is grateful for the loyal and reliable service of Joan Johnston for the past few years, but since she has to move on to other involvements in her life, we need a new Treasurer.

The responsibilities of the Treasurer are to make deposits, write checks to cover the expenses of producing and mailing *What Canst Thou Say*, and make periodic reports to the other volunteer WCTS staff. It is not a very big job because there is only a little activity, but this labor of love undergirds all that WCTS does.

If you are led to volunteer for these tasks and interested in joining the WCTS team, please send a letter expressing your interest and qualifications for the volunteer position as Treasurer of WCTS, along with a recommendation from your Monthly Meeting, by snail mail to WCTS c/o Richard Himmer, 1035 Hereford Drive, Blue Bell PA 19422-1925, or by email <info@whatcanstthousay.org>.

*The fruit of silence is prayer  
The fruit of prayer is faith  
The fruit of faith is love  
The fruit of love is service  
The fruit of service is peace  
—attributed to Mother Teresa*



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(See instructions for authors on page 5)



**February 2011**

## **Prayer**

**Editor: Mike Resman**

*Pray always.* (1 *Thessalonians* 5:17) Prayer can be so many things—conversation, petition, source of growth and fount of healing, to name a few. What happens when you pray? How has your prayer changed over time, and how has it changed your life? Share gifts you've received and miracles you witnessed. Have you ever prayed in ways that you regretted later? Tell us about the interior process that can form the center of life.

Deadline: November 15, 2010

**May 2011**

## **Animals**

**Guest Editor: Amy Perry with Mariellen Gilpin**

*And God saw that it was good.* (*Genesis* 1:20-26). How has an animal or part of one, real or envisioned, encouraged your spiritual journey? Has an animal become sacred to you? Are there any animals you have a spiritual connection to? What is that like? Has an animal somehow saved you? Have you experienced an animal's soul, or have you communed with one? Tell us how experience with an animal brought you closer to God.

Deadline: February 15, 2011

**August 2011**

## **Creativity and Mysticism**

**Editor: Judy Lumb**

Whether expressed as poetry, prose, drawing, painting, sculpture, dance, or music, our creativity often seems to have divine mystical sources. Have you felt like a channel with creative inspiration flowing through you? What is your experience of creative inspiration? How have others responded to your creativity? Have you experienced creative inspiration in a group? How do you celebrate and give thanks for your creativity?

Deadline: May 15, 2011

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***Silence and  
Music***