

Raw notes from the Quaker clerking workshop

[Sue Gardner's Blog](#)

Imagine a world in which I update this blog regularly.



[September 20, 2010](#) // [Sue Gardner](#)

Below are some raw notes I took this weekend at the Quaker workshop [I posted about yesterday](#). This is super-rough; if anything doesn't make sense just say so in the comments, and I will try to reconstruct what it meant :-)

How meeting attendees are expected to behave:

- The tone of the meeting is supposed to be unhurried, calm and thoughtful;
- People are expected to come with an open mind;
- People are expected to pay attention and listen carefully;
- People are expected to try to avoid clever debate or heated argument: to try to speak with love rather than judgment;
- Quakers wait to be called upon by the meeting clerk;
- Expressing agreement with other people is fine. Quakers will nod and say “this Friend speaks my mind.”
- People are expected to be open to learning and changing their minds;
- They're expected to be honest, and call out other people who are behaving badly;
- Quakers used to vote but don't any more: a decision isn't taken until the weight of the meeting is behind it;
- People are expected to be open to exploring disagreement. Avoiding conflict means avoiding the opportunity to learn;

- People should speak appropriately – if they are talking too much, they should restrain themselves. They shouldn't interrupt other people. Once they express a view, they should refrain from repeating themselves, or bringing up the issue again once the meeting has moved on;
- If Quakers are feeling shy or reticent or silenced, they should say that in the meeting, in order to get the impediment –whatever it is– resolved;
- In Quaker meetings, some work is done offline and presented to the meeting by committees. In the meeting, Quakers are expected to trust the diligence and the care of the committees, rather than aiming to second-guess or redo the committee's work;
- When people at meetings behave badly (compulsively wordsmithing other people's work, compulsively standing in the way of consensus, and so forth), the others at the meeting help everyone by encouraging that person to let go;
- Quakers are expected to not gossip about each other. Useful conversation is accurate and caring, promotes greater understanding, and does not break confidences. It has the result of increasing trust rather than diminishing it.
- Quakers are expected to express appreciation to the presiding clerk for their work. They're also expected to try to help the presiding clerk do better.

How meeting clerks [1] are expected to behave:

- Clerks are responsible for establishing the appropriate tone for the meeting – setting the stage at the beginning, and controlling the tone throughout;
- The clerk's expected to know more about every topic than practically everyone else. Most of that is research and thinking and other prep that happens outside of the meeting;

- The clerk's expected to help the group trust the work of the committees. This may involved working with committee chairs offline prior to the meeting, to ensure the material's in good shape and ready to present. The clerk is also expected to help the committees draft appropriate rough minutes in advance of the meeting, so the meeting has a starting point for its deliberations. The clerk should aim to establish a tone in which the committee's work can be appropriately received;
- Remind people how to behave in the meeting. Remind people of the higher purpose;
- Pace the meeting – providing for silence where necessary;
- Be conscious of their own effect on other attendees (e.g., hugging one person and not others can foster suspicion of cabals);
- Park their own strong opinions;
- Be humble and patient and loving, but not wimpy;
- Park their own desire to be popular;
- Have a sense of humour, and leaven the seriousness sometimes;
- Surface and aim to resolve conflict, rather than letting it fester under the meeting's surface;
- Build bridges among different constituencies in the meeting;
- Pay attention to the tone of the meeting, especially to people's complaints or problems that are keeping them from letting the meeting move forward. A lot of this is emotional work – understanding when people are feeling unheard, and helping them fix that.
- Right after the meeting, check in with the recording clerk to see if they accurately captured the sense of the meeting;
- Right after the meeting, connect with any participants who found the meeting particularly difficult, to help them resolve whatever the conflict is;
- Look around the group and see which other people may be able to lead [2], and encourage and help develop them.

[1] Quakers call the people who facilitate their meetings ‘clerks.’ The job of the clerk is to listen, understand and document meeting decisions. When clerks think they’re understanding the ‘sense of the meeting,’ they will draft a minute and read it back to the meeting for acceptance or refinement. At the Wikimedia Foundation, all our leadership roles contain elements of clerking.

[2] Quakers say “we don’t find Quaker leaders; we grow them.”

How recording clerks [3] are expected to behave:

- Does not facilitate;
- Listens really carefully during the meeting and creates the minutes that discern the truth of the meeting (“what does the meeting think”). The minutes are intended to capture all decisions, including who will do things, and by when;
- The recording clerk will draft the minutes during the meeting itself. Often the meeting pauses to have a draft minute read back to the group – this will surface dissent and misunderstandings, and allow for them to be resolved and reflected in a revised minute;
- Good minutes are thought to be brief but complete. They typically aim to show how a decision was arrived at, but try not to revive dissent. Points raised in discussion typically aren’t attributed to individuals, because ultimately consensus is achieved and disagreement resolved, so there’s no benefit to retaining a record of who said what. Good minutes aim to reflect the fact that everyone in the meeting is seeking unity;
- Minutes need to include sufficient rationale so that people don’t need to have the discussion all over again;
- Responsibility for the accuracy of the meeting resides with the clerk – both the recording clerk and the clerk signs the minutes

- Minutes should be published as soon as possible after the meeting, so that people's memories are fresh, and they are reminded of what they've committed to do.

[3] Recording clerks are the people who actually capture the minutes of the meeting for the clerk. Once the minutes are captured, both the recording clerk and the clerk sign them. Essentially: the recording clerk keeps the records, which frees the clerk up to do active facilitation.

How committees are expected to behave:

- The job of the committee is to actually do the work well, offline, out of the meeting. The meeting doesn't have sufficient time to go through issues with an appropriate level of detail and rigour: that is what the committees are for;
- Committees should bring to the meeting clear draft minutes (resolutions). Clerks should look at the minutes in advance and tweak them if he or she thinks it will help;
- Committee membership should not be determined by who is free, or most interested – people should not 'volunteer' to be on committees. Instead, committee membership should be determined carefully, by weighing what skills and abilities are needed, and who has them;
- Committee meetings should be open: unless confidentiality is required, anyone should be able to attend them;
- Committee work has the incidental benefit of creating time and space for committee members to develop personal relationships with each other, that strengthen the entire community;
- Committees are expected to do the hard work and resolve difficult issues. They are not expected to throw up their hands and bring back unresolved issues to the meeting;
- The meeting is asked to trust the committee, and the clerk is asked to help the meeting trust the committee. The

committee needs to live up to its part of that bargain, by meeting its deadlines and doing the work it's committed that it will do.

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[bawolff](#)

[September 20, 2010 at 4:26 PM](#)

I find this is fascinating – Its like an idealized version of how wiki consensus is supposed to work (but doesn't).

[Reply](#)

1. *Nemo*

[September 20, 2010 at 4:50 PM](#)

The link to the first minute should be <http://members.dcn.org/dfm/members/newsletters/DFMnews-200511.pdf>

[Reply](#)

[September 20, 2010 at 4:59 PM](#)

Fixed — thanks Nemo :-)

[Reply](#)

2. [*Philippe Beaudette*](#)

[September 20, 2010 at 5:15 PM](#)

I'm incredibly intrigued by this. It's interesting how many of these principles around behavior (though not necessarily the machinations of the clerks) also correspond and correlate to the teachings of non-violent leaders.... I'm thinking of Gandhi and King, particularly, but maybe that's no surprise in that both of them did a great deal of research into the principles of non-violence and Quakers would likely have been at the top of their lists of groups to research.

[Reply](#)

3. [*andres tao weissmann*](#)

[September 20, 2010 at 5:24 PM](#)

very interesting. is not easy to be a clerk i imagine.

[Reply](#)

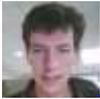


- o *Catherine Novak*

[October 30, 2012 at 2:49 PM](#)

It's not! Quakers talk frequently about how to help people avoid and/or recover from "clerking burnout".

[Reply](#)



- 4. [James Salsman](#)

[September 20, 2010 at 7:44 PM](#)

Aaron Burr opposed the Quakers by participating in a duel, and was later allowed to remove the motion to call the previous question from the Senate rules, thus preventing the U.S. from attaining universal health care. One of the few superstitions which the Quakers try to carry forward is that the body is the temple of the holy spirit. This spirit-material duality of philosophical outlook is still in doubt, but it may be equivalent to force-matter interactions. Many of those interactions also involve health care, but apparently the one which involves it the most is income equality.

[Reply](#)



- 5. [notafish](#)

[September 20, 2010 at 11:10 PM](#)

“Committee membership should not be determined by who is free, or most interested – people should not ‘volunteer’ to be on committees. Instead, committee membership should be determined carefully, by weighing what skills and abilities are needed, and who has them;”

This definitely is something we could learn from. However, how does one take into account will and availability? i.e. what if the “most suited” person cannot participate? (or is that anyway part of the assessment of who is best suited?).

[Reply](#)



6. [Waldir](#)

[September 21, 2010 at 12:14 AM](#)

“avoid clever debate”? Maybe it’s because I’m not a native English speaker, but that bit didn’t make a lot of sense to me, especially given the later bit “People are expected to be open to exploring disagreement. Avoiding conflict means avoiding the opportunity to learn;” Care to clarify? :)

[Reply](#)



o [Sue Gardner](#)

[September 21, 2010 at 12:53 AM](#)

Yeah, I can see how that might be a little perplexing ;-)
Basically what it means though, is that when Quakers are disagreeing, their goal is supposed to be figuring out what the right answer is, rather than each of them just trying to win a

fight. So, they're supposed to avoid showing off intellectually, trapping their opponent, demolishing their arguments and overpowering them — all that kind of thing. Instead of indulging in 'clever debate,' they're supposed to work together to try to come to the best possible answer.

I have seen Wikimedians do that too. I've seen some really great discussions on the wikis and mailing lists, when someone will try to characterize and play back another person's position (that they disagree with), or they will attempt to fairly summarize all the views expressed thus far, regardless of what they themselves think. I always love that; it strikes me as super-helpful in getting people closer to consensus :-)

[Reply](#)

7. [Russ Nelson](#)

[October 23, 2010 at 10:43 AM](#)

I'd further note that Quakers seek unity, not consensus. Unity is, as you suggest, a reflection of the real world, of God's will for Friends. Whereas, consensus involves people standing aside from the decision in the cause of going forward. That means that Quaker decision-making can be very time-consuming. But ... once the decision is made, the entire society is behind the decision.

That said ... a need for unity can also be a cause for schisms (aka forks, in our context). There's a complex chart of the splitting and joining of various factions of the society. There have probably been about twenty separate branches of the Society of Friends, some of which died out, some of which merged back together, and some of which continue separately to this day. So, Christocentric Friends and universalist Friends continue separately in the United States yearly meetings, with

different monthly meetings being associated with one or the other, or even both. Whereas, in Britain, those two branches of Friends have merged together.

[Reply](#)

8. [*Joseph Reagle*](#)

[September 21, 2010 at 5:29 AM](#)

I've very much enjoyed these notes and discussion. I don't think I've mentioned it before because I'm not sure it adds anything new to the massive literature from Quakers (and it has its own culture that might even be further removed from those not familiar with the tradition) — but since you are geeking out so much on this :-) — you might also be interested in the “Sanghakarman” decision making among Buddhists. It has many analogues to your notes above, as seen in Thich Nhat Hanh's “Joyfully Together: The Art of Building a Harmonious Community”. Similarities in their “planning” meetings include silence, skillful means, compassionate speech, deep listening, “sangha eyes and ears”, etc.

[Reply](#)

9. [*Russ Nelson*](#)

[September 21, 2010 at 12:46 PM](#)

I should note that all of what you have written is about Meeting for Business. The First Day (weekly, on Sunday) Meeting for Worship is an entirely different matter. MfB happens monthly in Monthly Meetings, quarterly in Quarterly Meetings, yearly in Yearly

meeting and, well, there used to be Five-Year Meetings, but the larger Quaker bodies usually meet even more often than yearly. Not every meeting is part of a Quarter. You usually have a Quarter when there is a high density of meetings, like near Philly or NYC.

[Reply](#)

10. [*filceolaire*](#)

[September 25, 2010 at 1:51 AM](#)

Thanks for posting this. The parallels with and differences from Wikipedia decision making are fascinating.

[Reply](#)

11. [*Zoe Rei*](#)

[May 10, 2011 at 10:47 AM](#)

Hi Sue,

My name is Zoe Rei and I am the editor of The Quake magazine, a new publication dedicated to Young Adult Friends around the world. I found your blog post on the clerk workshop you attended in 2010 and thought the expectations you listed were very helpful and clear. I was wondering if I could mention this posting in an article I am writing?

In Peace

~Zoe