

The Practice of Clearness

Handbook for facilitating Community Clearness Circles



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Introduction to the Practice of Clearness

The “Religious Society of Friends” (also known as “Quakers”) have at the heart of their common life a spiritual practice known simply as “Clearness.” Clearness is central to how Quakers worship, do community business, and make decisions. It is a practice of gathering in community, convening and holding a holy space, allowing for long periods of silence, and listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit, the “inner teacher,” to speak to individuals and to the community as a whole. Out of the silence, this voice emerges from members the community to discern the will of God, speak truth, and bring a communal wisdom greater than an individual could possess.

When a member of the community struggles with a challenge or decision that could benefit from the practice of Clearness, a “Meeting for Clearness,” “Clearness Committee” or “Clearness Circle” can be convened, with that person’s challenge at the center. In a gathering 2-3 hours in length, members of the community are invited to hold in worship, prayer, and discernment the person and the question they bring, so that the path forward might become clear. Parker Palmer writes: “Behind the Clearness Committee is a simple but crucial conviction: each of us has an inner teacher, a voice of truth, that offers the guidance and power we need to deal with our problems. But that inner voice is often garbled by various kinds of inward and outward interference.”

The function of the Clearness Committee is not to give advice or “fix” people from the outside in, but rather to help people remove the interference allowing discovery of their own wisdom from the inside out. If we do not believe in the reality of inner wisdom, the Clearness Committee can become an opportunity for manipulation. But if we respect the power of the inner teacher, then Clearness can be a remarkable way to help someone name and claim his or her deepest truth.

What is Clearness?

Palmer describes Clearness in this way: “When used with care, a clearness committee results in a state of inner rest that Quakers call “clarity.” To be “clear” means to have reached a profoundly satisfying resolution to some difficult question. Three important qualities of wellbeing always accompany clarity: 1) a deep sense of inner reassurance that the decision will not lead to regret; 2) a feeling of release from emotional burdens associated with the decision; and 3) an increased sense of strength to persevere through the challenges of carrying out a decision.” It is the state of feeling whole with an idea, being ready to move forward on a decision free from spiritual/mental confusion that the choice is right. Clearness does not always mean happiness or excitement.

What is Discernment?

Discernment is process of sifting through (Latin: *cernere* “to sift”) and of listening for rightness, of weighing options, and listening to the Inner Teacher to find guidance. It is not a magic act or a means of divination. Information gathering and reason is part of this process—as is listening to deep inner wisdom, voice of Holy Spirit.

When have you needed the wisdom of others to make a key decision? How did you find it?

What issue or decision are you holding now that could benefit from more clearness?

Preparing for Clearness

Step 1: Name and explore the issue for which you seek clearness

While the issue at hand may seem straightforward, take some time to reflect on it. See if you can condense the essential question you are wrestling with into a single sentence. Explore the variety of factors, contexts, and possible solutions—doing as much discernment on your own as possible so as to make the best use of your time discerning in community. Be prepared to write up and share, your reflections with your Clearness Committee.

Practice: Writing Reflection for Clearness

Several days before the Clearness Circle, the person seeking clearness should complete the “Preparing for Clearness” worksheet. Using that as a guide, write up, in 3-5 pages, a summary document in four sections: 1) Stating in depth the issue needing clearness. 2) Exploring the background or contextual factors at play. 3) Describing any attempts you have made in resolving this issue. 4) Identifying elements that are becoming clear (or partially clear) as you move forward.

Step 2: Identify your discerners

The person who is seeking clearness is known as the "focus person." The focus person identifies and invites a group of "discerners," 4-6 people who will form the Clearness Committee. The discerners should be a diverse group of people who know you well and/or who are people of spiritual depth and wisdom. You do not want people who rush to advice or who have a particular bias toward one outcome on the issue you are wrestling with. Find people who are good listeners, who ask good questions, who are open to a variety of possibilities, who are in touch with their own emotions and spiritual depth, and who will speak truth to you.

Step 3: Select a Clerk

From the Discerners, a "clerk" is selected. The clerk convenes the meeting, attends to the meeting logistics, takes notes of questions and responses during the meeting, and keeps time. If the clearness practice is new to you, selecting a clerk with prior experience in leading clearness practice is particularly important. Once the clerk is identified, they take over the task of convening the Clearness Circle, handling all logistics, distributing the focus person's written reflection to the Clearness Committee members, and ensuring the discerners have the information they need.

Step 4: Prepare the gathering space

On the day of the Clearness Circle the clerk should arrive 20-30 minutes early to arrange chairs in a circle and create a comfortable, sacred space. Consider placing a fabric covered low table in the middle of the circle with a candle and other sacred objects, perhaps incense or essential oils, a singing bowl or chime, and/or elements of nature. Reserve a chair for the focus person where they will be comfortable and can see and hear all the other participants. The clerk will also need a notebook to record the date of the Clearness Circle, the names of the discerners, the discernment question posed, and to write down the questions that the Clearness Committee asks during the gathering. These notes are given to the focus person after the gathering as an aid to their continued discernment. Consider taking these notes in a new journal, with one question written on the top of each page. Following the gathering, the focus person may wish to use that journal for further reflection.

6. What actions have you already taken in trying to move forward on the issue?

7. How do you feel when reflecting on the issue?

8. Why do you think this issue is a concern for you? Think about more than just the surface reasons.

9. If you have prayed about this issue, what has come up in your prayers?

10. Any other things that seem important or relevant to note?

Written Reflection

Using this worksheet as a guide, write a summary document that is 3-5 pages in four sections: 1) Stating in depth the issue needing clearness. 2) Exploring the background or contextual factors at play. 3) Describing any attempts you have made in resolving this issue. 4) Identifying elements that are becoming clear (or partially clear) as you move forward. If possible, share this document with the members of your clearness committee at least a week before your meeting is scheduled.

Convening a Clearness Circle

Instructions for the Clerk of the Meeting:

Welcome participants into the circle, and thank them for being present. Have members of the circle introduce themselves (and name their relationship to focus person if appropriate.) Remind the group of the time commitment agreed upon (2 hours, 3 hours) and take care of any housekeeping needs (silence phones, refreshments, bathrooms, etc.).

Convene the Clearness Circle (light a candle, ring bell, deep breath, time of silence, etc.).

Read this quote from Parker Palmer about the nature of Clearness:

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

Review the definitions:

Discernment - A process of sifting through (from the Latin: *cernere*), and of listening for rightness, weighing options and listening to the Inner Teacher to find guidance. It's not magic or a means of divination. Information gathering and reason is part of this process—as is listening to deep inner wisdom, voice of Holy Spirit.

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

Review the Roles:

Clerk—facilitates the process, take notes (particularly the questions asked), tend to: time, space, and guidelines.

Focus person—seeks clearness, listens, speaks.

Discerners—listen, hold space and silence, ask questions.

Frame the Clearness Circle practice:

As we gather, we are listening for the voice of the Inner Teacher, however you understand it: Holy Spirit, Divine Wisdom, Still Small Voice, Your True Self. The practice of Clearness is risky and counter-cultural, in that we open up what we often see as our personal/private concerns to the community, trust that the community will receive us with open hearts, and will join us in our discernment. At the heart of this practice is silence, becoming still enough to "Listen to the Sound of the Genuine" that speaks to our inmost, truest self.

As you hold silence you may experience a question “bubbling up.” Notice it, and hold it. If you are a person who normally speaks, perhaps hold it longer than you otherwise might. If you are a person who normally waits to speak, consider having courage to speak the questions sooner. Participants often experience that others are holding the same question, and hear their question spoken by another. The best questions aren’t ones with singular or predictable answers, but are questions that lead to more questions and towards clearness. Sometimes the most powerful questions are ones that lead the focus person to a time of silence before answering—or are simply held by them without reply.

As we go forward, be intentional about holding the silence, keep focused on the focus person, listen for Spirit, and be open to whatever happens.

(As needed, you may also want to review some of the “Introduction to the practice of Clearness” material, especially for people new to the process.)

Go over Covenants of Presence:

- Confidential
 - After the Clearness circle, don’t speak with others about what was said
 - Also, don’t speak with the focus person about the problem unless he or she requests a conversation.
- Once we begin, only 3 things are allowed:
 - Silence
 - Discerners may ask a question
 - The focus person may speak
- Be sure you are asking questions not making statements
 - Ensure questions are as open-ended as possible—drawing from listening and deep wisdom
 - Don’t explain your question, offer advice, or try to guide—no leading questions
 - Imaginative, intuitive questions are good—go with them
- Silence is OK—don’t feel the need to fill space, let the questions linger
- Not answering is OK, some questions need to be held
- Stay focused on the focus person:
 - We are simply to surround the focus person with quiet, loving space, resisting even the temptation to comfort or reassure or encourage this person (liminal space), but simply being present to him or her with our attention and our questions and our care.
- Does anyone have other covenants to add?

Review the process:

1) We will start with an opening period of silence, in which discerners center in the space, orient themselves to the wellbeing of the focus person and to listening inwardly for themselves, while the focus person seeks inner space to best articulate his/her question (approx. ten minutes)

2) When the focus person is ready, they can break the silence by offering of the clearness question and its context (approx. five to ten minutes)

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

4) Mark the time in a ritual way (bell, deep breath, etc) and begin with a period of silent reflection in which the members of the committee consider what the focus person has said, including what they hear behind the focus person's words (approx. five minutes)

5) The Clerk then breaks the silence by inviting the asking of questions, and the heart of the Clearness practice begins (1-2 hours).

6) When 15 minutes remain, the Clerk may invite the rules be suspended and allow mirroring from the discerners. Mirroring is not advice or answer giving, but simply reflecting back what was heard (“I heard a growing sense of clearness.” “I heard someone who takes their family commitments seriously” etc). The focus person may also share reflections. (10 mins)

7) When 5 minutes remain, the Clerk calls the Clearness Circle to a close, and invites affirmations from the discerners to the focus person. This process can leave the focus person in a very vulnerable state, so be sure to surround them with love and affirmation. (5 minutes)

8) End by thanking the participants and the Spirit, offering a prayer as appropriate, and ritually mark the closing (ring bell, extinguish candle, etc.).

Sample timeline for a 2-hour Clearness Circle

(for 3-hour Circle, add additional time to question period)

7:05 Welcome, intros
7:08 Explain process
7:15 Call for Spirit, silence to center, focus person form question
7:25 Focus person break silence to share Clearness question and context
7:35 Discerners ask clarifying questions
7:40 Silence to consider
7:45 Question period begins
8:45 Suspend rules for mirroring?
8:55 Celebrate and affirm focus person and strengths
9:00 Closing, thanks to participants and Spirit