

August 21, 1983

Some Friends here may have heard the same story I did about a woman who, having a friend who was deeply troubled in spirit, thought that she might provide some respite and support by taking the troubled person on a drive in the country. But once they were in the car driving among lakes, farms and forests, she discovered that her agitated friend scarcely noticed their beautiful surroundings. When they were called to his attention, he seemed to attend to them for only the briefest instant before resuming his sad narrative of conflict, betrayal and disappointment. And so it seemed to the woman who had hoped to provide a healing service that her own efforts, and all the beauties of nature, were simply overwhelmed by the troubles her friend carried with him in his heart and mind.

This story came to mind just this last week when I spent three days at Powell House with a group of about 25 teenagers. These young people had just spent a long hot summer in uncompensated volunteer work, providing day care for refugee children in New York City. The three day conference at Powell House was a sort of reward for them—a time to reflect upon the experience they had had, and upon the spiritual meaning of service to others, and also a time for recreation and for experiencing the beauties of nature. Close to Powell House there is a bird sanctuary. There is also a hiking trail leading to a cliff which affords a panoramic view of a lovely valley. There are also many country lanes bordered by white fences beyond which thoroughbred horses graze in lush green fields. We had allowed lots of free time in the schedule and presumed that these young people would scatter to partake of these various wonders. Instead, as soon as the free time came, they made a beeline for the high-fi system, inserted the rock music cassettes they had brought from home, which they played at a very loud volume, and spent the free time dancing and playing ping pong, scarcely straying more than 20 feet from the sound system amplifier. Only some of the adult supervisors explored the country side, perhaps propelled into doing so as much by the musical ambiance in the conference center as by the attractions of nature.

Now this was a group of bright and generous-spirited young people not in any apparent need of inner spiritual healing. Nevertheless, it did seem like something of a waste that, after traveling many hours to get to a new setting, they were content with an experience which would have been much the same had it been conducted in the Brooklyn church basement in which they had worked all summer providing day care.

It is interesting to reflect that even though we may not have a tape cassette in our hip pocket, all of us do, nevertheless, carry our sounds about with us. They may be sounds of disappointment, greed, anguish or conflict. They may be limiting sounds—sounds about our own inabilities. I spent many years thinking that I could not speak to more than three people at once, that I could not make speeches. They may be sounds of criticism of others, or sounds of condescension. They may be sounds of feeling sorry for ourselves, habits of self pity or of depression. The sounds might be sufficient to overwhelm or screen out the healing influences of the creation.

If we have a problem at work, it often happens that after taking a vacation and going to some new environment, we can return with a different perspective. Everything may be essentially the same, but our ideas about it have a freshness and a new creativity. But how do we take a vacation from the sounds we carry about with us in our heads? How do we begin to see them for what they are? How do we get the perspective which heals?

Jesus of Nazareth told us that the Kingdom of Heaven is within us. And in the beautiful opening versus of the Dhammapada, the sayings of the Buddha, we read that "with our minds we make our world." In these statements, I take it that we are being told that the quality of the life we have here on this earth is a function not so much of external circumstances as of what sounds we have in our minds and in our hearts.

To the extent that we can succeed in practicing inner silence, in letting go of our wanderings and roving of mind, in letting go of what Robert Barclay alluded to as our vain imaginings, in following George Fox's counsel to be still from our own thoughts, we begin to make a new world for ourselves, a world of peace and truth and beauty. Inner silence is the key to the Kingdom within us.