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# That Friend Speaks My Mind

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*by Bill Mitchell, Clerk of the Board of Managers, resident 2013-2015*

At a recent meeting at the Catholic Church where my wife, Carol, and I worship, I found myself the lone holdout from what would otherwise have represented a consensus.

But listening to my fellow committee members at the Paulist Center make their case, I spotted a hole or two in mine. And I noticed some wisdom I'd not originally picked up in theirs.

So my next move was easy.

"My friends speak my mind," I told the group.

Actually, I prefaced that comment with some context: "As the Quakers like to say..."

I first encountered these words – the more common reference is singular, as in "That Friend speaks my mind" – during a House Meeting for Business at BHFH when Carol and I lived in the house from June 2013 to August 2015.

The phrase struck me as odd and formal. But it sure did move things along. And in such a good way, expressing not only support for an idea but solidarity with its backer.

I've been appreciating this and other tools of Quaker process as I dig into my early days as clerk of the BHFH board, the first non-Quaker (as far as I know) to serve in this capacity since the House got started in 1957.

It's a fascinating time to be involved in the work and life of BHFH, with the strategic plan gaining traction inside and outside the house and stronger alliances linking the house with Beacon Hill Friends Meeting.

It's also a little daunting.

In his 2003 book, *The Quakers in America*, Thomas D. Hamm offers a bracing view of the role of clerk: "The clerk's responsibilities in a Quaker meeting for business are heavy. He or she has the duty of judging the 'sense of the meeting,' based not only on spoken comments but also on nonverbal cues and his or her own sense of the motions of the Spirit in the meeting."

Indeed, Quaker language can at times reflect such restraint that discerning the real meaning requires exploration of just the sort of nonverbal world of the Spirit sketched by Hamm.

So much remains unspoken with a phrase like "that friend speaks

my mind." When I hear it, I assume the speaker doesn't mean to say "that friend speaks my entire mind" on the topic under discussion. More likely, the speaker is indicating "that friend speaks enough of my mind" that, in the interest of moving the discussion forward, they'll avoid elaborating.

Limiting one's comments like that requires a level of humility and perspective that I wish I'd been able to muster over the years. It pains me to recall the countless work meetings that ran on way too long, at least partly the result of my failure to acknowledge the wisdom of friends. And to leave it at that.

I've also been learning about a concise Quaker phrase used to express opposition in a meeting. When a nominating committee puts forward a name that seems like a really bad idea, Quakers have been known to pull the following from their phrasebook: "This Friend's name would not have occurred to me."

Note to self: Should anyone respond to an idea at the next board meeting by indicating it "would not have occurred" to them, it might be worth probing more deeply.

Peter Lasersohn, a linguistics professor at the University of Illinois, traced the first written use of "That friend speaks my mind" to a 19th Century newspaper reference that summed up Quaker decision-making in a pretty interesting way.

When Quakers decide something, the Niles Weekly Register noted in an 1821 article, it's likely that the topic under discussion has been "broached, discussed, and decided upon in less time, perhaps, than we have taken to relate the mode of proceeding; for these people do not think it necessary to use ten thousand words to communicate ten ideas, or give to ten ideas ten thousand forms."

What a concept!

Near the end of that meeting at the Paulist Center the other night, it was fascinating to watch a colleague come around on a point in dispute.

"What's that thing the Quakers say?" he asked. "The friends speak my mind," I prompted.

"Yeah, that," he said.

Amen.