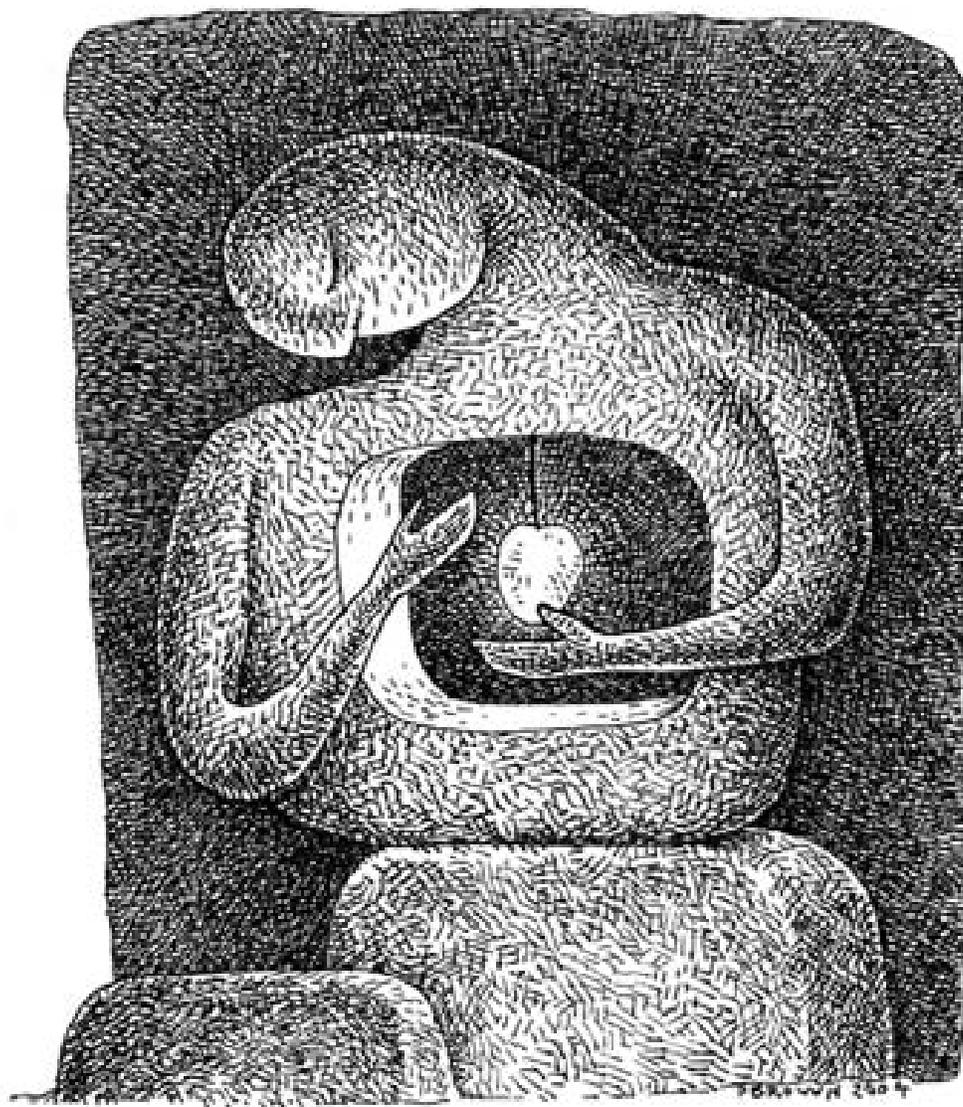


**QUAKER CORPORATE DISCERNMENT AS A MODEL FOR
COLLABORATION IN THEATRE**

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Introduction

We talk a lot about collaboration in theatre. It's a buzzword heard frequently in the classroom and in production, but what does it mean? And do we *really* do it? While many of us believe in collaboration, and while we may have experienced success and failure at it and know the bliss and agony of it, we seldom really explore the implications of this type of work. I suggest that we as a theatre community lack a common understanding of what we mean by collaboration. To what degree do we engage and invest in this way of making art together? What would it mean to submit whole-heartedly to a collaborative process? And where do we go to find examples of this way of working?

When I entered the field of design for theatre, I believed my primary function as a designer was to use every skill, technique, and tool in my power to fulfill the director's vision for a production. My job was to bring knowledge of theatrical design, and the director's job was to bring knowledge of the play. Before long, through a series of relationships with directors and designers, I began to hear talk of collaboration. The designer, I learned, must also come to the table with a unique connection to the script. This idea changed my approach to design and demanded that I take an active role in searching and learning the script and discovering a deep connection to the material.

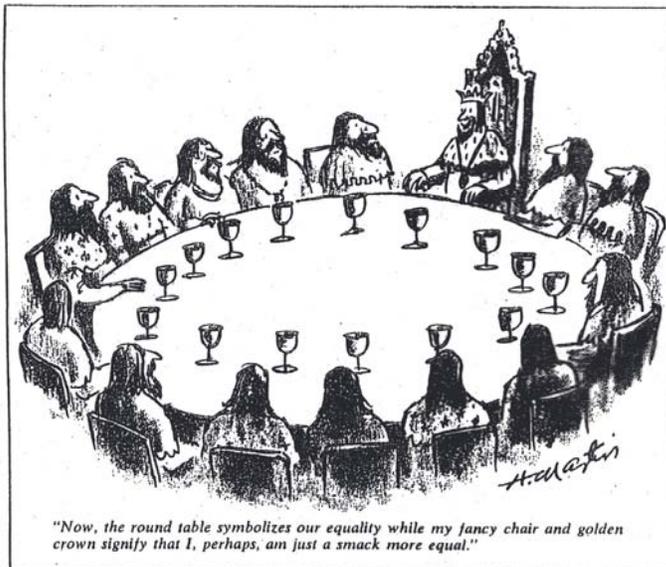
Despite what may be a commonly held belief in collaboration, the design and production process still varies considerably between artistic teams, and from show to show. Some directors know exactly what they want, and they hope to "collaborate" with the designers in order to create that already conceived vision. Similarly, some designers get a strong initial vision for a script and they expect to "collaborate" with the director until everyone agrees on that design. In contrast, other directors enter a production with ideas open and no design preconceptions at all, while some designers prefer to look solely to the director for guidance from the beginning. Although many of these differences can be attributed to personality traits, artistic temperaments, and a unique connection (or lack of connection) to a particular script, entwined here are also different philosophies of collaboration, despite everyone's apparent belief in the idea.

A director once told me that, although particular styles may vary from director to director, one essential quality of any good director is that she have strong opinions. Likewise, some designers seem to have a distrust of directors in general, believing them overly controlling. Having felt under-appreciated and marginalized, these colleagues have urged me to be firm and assert my own opinions. But if we are not careful here we risk placing one set of ideas in opposition to another, and creating an adversarial relationship. The work of collaboration is less a matter of battling out our ideas until we agree, and more a process of discerning together which direction is best for the production. This is easier said than done. I would like to suggest that the Quaker tradition (The Religious Society of Friends) has something to offer us with its long history of decision-making in community. Let us first observe some organizational structures and how they affect decision-making.

Models of Decision-Making

We have around us a wide variety of decision-making models. Our legislatures, courts, and schools often operate under adversarial decision-making processes where one perspective opposes another, where each “side” presents a clearly articulated case supported by proof, and where a decision results in winners and losers.¹ We also have a structured military system with a series of persons ordered in a clearly established hierarchy, with authority and decision-making power increasing or decreasing according to rank. Clearly, both of these examples allow little room for true collaboration among those involved. Instead, the decision is made in isolation from the rest of the community. These models can be quickly dismissed if we are seeking an organizational structure which encourages collaboration.

Two other models of decision-making more conducive to collaboration are the pyramid and the round table. The model of a pyramid (with the leader at the apex followed by a band of members) allows for potential collaboration among members under the headship of one leader. This is better, but the ultimate power to decide is still given to one individual. Closer yet is the model of a round table, with equal members sharing ideas with one another and working toward consensus. At first the round table approach appears to work. However, there are two main problems with this model. First, often present at the table is a “king” who is secretly just a little “more equal” than the other



members. The “king” wishes to be equal, and communicates to the other members that he is equal, but secretly his opinions weigh more than other members. It is possible that consensus may be reached and collaboration may be accomplished if the “king” is gracious. However, the simple presence of the “king” figure can remain an unspoken inhibitor to true collaboration.

Even if there is no “king” figure, this model still has complications. In this approach, the members of the circle come to the table and bounce ideas off

one another, in hopes of coming to common agreement on the direction to go. At first this sounds good. However, there is something lacking in this model. The sole content of this model is the ideas of the members. I suggest, based on the Quaker approach, that there exists a need for something at the core of the circle. For Quakers this is the inward Light of Christ, the gentle leading of God for that group of people in some particular decision.² I suggest that for us in theatre the core is the same: the script at hand, held in the Light of Christ. The task for an artistic team is not to merely come to consensus on one another’s

¹ This idea is pointed out in Chuck Orwiler “Taking Care of Business” (Online: Barclay Press, 2004).

² The pyramid, the round table, and the christocentric models are adapted from Colin Saxton, “Friends Testimonies IV” (Sermon, North Valley Friends Church, Newberg, OR, 22 February, 2004).

ideas around a particular production style or design, although that is *part* of the process. The deeper calling for the team is to discern together what lies at the core of the script, and to listen for what the playwright has to say to a particular audience in a unique time. I suggest that this process of discernment is qualitatively different than mere consensus, and I urge us to look to the Quaker tradition for help.

Quaker Corporate Discernment

Historically, Quakers have not had many positive things to say about theatre. Driven by the desire to avoid worldly distractions and live simply, the performing arts were viewed by early Friends as little more than vanity and excess. However, over the 350 years of Quakerism, the Friends have placed a high value on decision-making in community. They have refined their process into what Chuck Orwiler calls “the art of voluntary attention practiced within a culture of listening,”³ or more simply, corporate discernment. Friends have been intentional about corporate discernment, and whether they like it or not, they have valuable lessons to share with the artistic team—lessons which can foster the most creative, most unified, and most dynamic theatre.

At the core of Quakerism is the deep conviction that Jesus, the Word of God, has come to teach His people Himself.⁴ Friends believe that the risen Christ is the Inward Light⁵ that dwells in all people, young or old, male or female, slave or free. God can and does speak to and through all people, regardless of their social status or level of education, and, some would say, regardless of whether or not they recognize the voice as God’s voice. Simply put, Friends hold the belief that there is “that of God in all people.”⁶

This core value of the Quaker tradition manifests itself in how Friends conduct meetings for worship and meetings for business. Because Christ is present and desires to teach us Himself, and because all people have direct access to God, then every person at a gathered meeting has the potential to serve in a role of ministry. In fact, every individual has the responsibility of bringing herself present before God with her whole being and listening for what God might have to say to her, or what God might have to say *through* her to the rest of the community. Because God is immediately present in our everyday activities, meetings for business are also meetings for worship. Wherever we are gathered in God’s name, God is present with us. Meetings for business are less about making an efficient decision than they are about discerning corporately the will of God in a particular situation.



³ Charles M. Orwiler, “A Discernment-Based Model of Church Decision-Making.” (D.Min. diss., George Fox University, 2003), 82.

⁴ George Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, 8, 48, 114.

⁵ George Fox, “The Epistles of George Fox.” 133, 134, 135.

⁶ George Fox, “The Epistles of George Fox.” 134, 135.

The community gathers around a particular issue and listens for God’s promptings and insights. Each member of the gathering is charged with the responsibility to listen for the leading of God, and to speak if prompted to do so. Likewise, when a member of the community speaks, the rest of the gathered body is charged with the responsibility to hold the spoken words with weight, trusting that the individual spoke out of a prompting from God, and asking what God might be saying through the individual. Throughout the process, a clerk gently keeps the meeting focused on the issue at hand and reminds the meeting to listen carefully to one another and to God. In due time the clerk gathers a “sense of the meeting.” Once that sense of the meeting becomes clear, the clerk offers it to the community, asking for clarification or affirmation. The group is then charged with the task of moving ahead in response to God’s direction.

Corporate Discernment in the Artistic Process

As a Quaker artist, I believe that if I am mindful, God can dwell at the center of my artistic process—both in solitude and in community. The Creator of creators can be the source of inspiration and revelation to each person involved in an artistic team. Lives can be touched through story, no doubt, and it may be that God desires us to use our gifts well to tell a story in just the right way, so that God may collaborate with us to touch our audience. The task at hand in the design meetings, then, is not to simply outline the director’s approach to the show and establish how each design element will fulfill that approach, but rather to discern as a community what is right about a particular script to a unique audience at a specific time in history. If we can trust one another to listen closely to the Creator and if we all engage each team member’s unique perspective, we have the potential to end up with a work of art that is rich and whole. When we do this, our work can become an act of worship.

I believe that God, the Creator, is at work (and at play) with me in my art and in my vocation. Not that I’m always fulfilling God’s greatest desire and the world’s greatest need by designing the environment for a show, but I believe that God is the Source of my inspiration, and that God is a collaborator with me in my artistic process. And, it is often said that fiction can carry the same weight as non-fiction, and can communicate truths about the human condition with equal or better force. And if all truth is God’s truth,⁷ then it is not difficult to believe that God is interested in helping us tell the truth well through our stories. It is *possible* that there is some Right Way to present a show at a particular time and for a unique audience. Maybe there is some Choice out there which would best communicate the show. And maybe, by listening closely for that Way, we will find it together. This is what I do as a designer. Listen. Wait. Hope. It’s enormously intuitive and difficult to talk about. Maybe it’s just a style—a way of working. But for me it’s also a conviction.

Just as a Quaker meeting for business can also be a meeting for worship, the process of discerning a conceptual approach to a work of theatre can be a corporate spiritual exercise. Every member of the artistic team brings to the table a unique set of gifts and insights, as well as biases and blocks. Because Christ is present in our lives and desires to commune with us in our everyday activities, we can enter into a script mindful of what Christ might show us through it. Rather than relying on the director to create a

⁷ Arthur F. Holmes, [The Idea of a Christian College](#).

vision for a show, each member of the artistic team carries the responsibility of bringing her whole self to the text in order to fully engage the story and listen for what lies at the core of the playwright's message. Each individual must then be open to share those insights with the rest of the team.

The clerk of the design meeting is charged with the task of gathering the sense of the meeting into a conceptual approach, creating a foundation upon which the artistic team can begin building the production. In Quaker meetings with pastoral staff⁸ the role of clerk is intentionally filled by a non-staff member, nominated and approved by the meeting based on the particular gifts of the individual. The role of clerk is one of listening and gathering others' ideas. The clerk does not typically contribute content to a discussion, but rather guides others in the process. Depending on whether or not an individual is gifted in discernment, the clerk in a design meeting for theatre may or may not be the director.

I am not suggesting here that the role of a director be somehow diminished or limited. Nor am I suggesting that the director have less of a vision, or that she remain silent when it comes to discussing the costumes or scenery. On the contrary, I am suggesting the director be extremely active and present in the design meetings *along with* the other members of the artistic team. It is not that the director should not bring a vision; it is that *every* member should come to the table with a fully engaged response to the script, and each individual's response should be well considered. The director's work does not decrease in this model; every one else's work increases. Just as we are all given the freedom and responsibility of reading the scriptures ourselves and not just receiving enlightenment from the pulpit, we are also all charged with the task of engaging the script and interpreting it to our audience.

Admittedly, Quakers have had a reputation of being bad followers. But it is not that I have a problem with following; I am simply wary of doing it under the pretense of collaboration. If we are not careful, it is easy to confuse collaboration with simply being nice and amiable while still operating within a hierarchical model. I want to explore what it means to truly collaborate. A critical beginning is when each member contributes her unique and valuable perspective. However, true collaboration is evidenced in what she does with that contribution and how she listens and responds to other's ideas. It's not so much about what she brings or doesn't bring, it's about how she listens after she's shared her part.

Suggestions for Corporate Discernment

This is not always an easy task. Quakers have, over time, gathered some helpful guidelines in corporate discernment. Here are some of them adapted to the collaborative art of theatre.⁹

⁸ There are a wide variety of organizational structures in Quaker meetings. Some have paid clergy and some so not. Some have a programmed worship service with organized music and a sermon, while some are "un-programmed" with ministry shared by any member who senses a prompting to do so. Some meetings are programmed with a segment of un-programmed time referred to as "open worship."

⁹ Guidelines adapted from Paul Anderson "With Christ in Decision-Making" (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 1990). Many of these insights may also be attributed to Dealous Cox, former clerk of Reedwood Friends Church.

1. At its best, the design meeting can also be a meeting for worship. In such a meeting the central question is not “What is expedient?” nor even “What is the group consensus?” but “What is the leading of Christ in our midst?” If discerning the leading of Christ is really our goal, then design meetings ought to be conducted with enough “spaciousness” (and begin early enough in the production process) to allow members to truly listen to one another and to reflect on the inward Light of Christ.
2. All members who have something to say have the responsibility to do so clearly; but having done so, they must release their contributions to the larger sense of the meeting. No individual possesses all of God’s truth, and the contribution of each person who has something to say is essential. To withhold one’s truth is poor stewardship of God’s gifts and is detrimental to the collaborative process. It may have been the very piece needed to complete the puzzle.¹⁰
3. It is not the goal of any one individual to promote or defend her own idea simply because it is interesting or creative, but rather to point the team to the source of inspiration—the script in the Light of Christ. Take care to let go of the desire to receive praise for a particular idea or piece of inspiration. Some of the best theatre happens when it’s not important who gets the credit.
4. Where there is a conflict of perspective, the issue must be sorted until the genuine disagreement is clarified. Then those who hold opposing views are called to distinguish between preference and conscience. If it is a matter of preference, release it to the group and do not stand in its way. If it is a matter of conscience, hold to your conviction as long as it holds you. It is sometimes true that the masses are deceived and the “least voice” may be prophetic. At the same time, we do well to recognize that there are “weighty friends”—those with considerable experience or a particularly keen sense of the Light. In an educational setting, this may be a faculty member or guest artist, though everyone has the potential to be blinded by an ego or become stuck in a particular pattern of operation.
5. When complications arise or when there exists disunity in the meeting, take time to be silent as a group, let go of any sense of opposition or antagonistic feelings, and, remembering that everyone is working toward the same goal, reflect on the following queries.
 - Is this idea self-serving, or does it come from a desire to communicate what’s at the core of the script? Have I done my homework and do I know the script and my research?
 - Is this idea, or is my resistance to another’s idea, motivated out of fear? Is it motivated out of pride? Does it matter who gets the credit for this idea?
 - Is this a matter of preference or conscience? If it is a matter of preference, am I willing to state that it is so and step aside in this matter?

¹⁰ Just as the designers report to the production meeting about the design and build process, I appreciate it when a director shares in a production meeting about the joys and struggles of actor rehearsal. This helps level the playing field and brings designers into an important part of the production process from which they are often otherwise disconnected.

- Am I listening to my friend’s words with the *possibility* that she is speaking the words of God to me? Or am I somehow blinded by my own ideas?
6. Artists must agree to wait until there is clarity of leading and then support the decisions made in unity. When this happens, groups begin to experience the exciting reality of Christ’s present leadership, and the meeting is energized to move forward in the strength of unity. Speaking with a united voice depends on waiting long enough to receive a common sense of leading.
 7. Following the meeting, record any decisions made by means of a written “minute.” This helps remind everyone of the sense of the meeting, what was discussed and agreed upon, and who was charged with particular tasks. This helps prevent and clarify misunderstandings, and provides opportunity for members to reflect on and celebrate the good work that was done.
 8. Trust each other and take courage to risk stepping out. Each person around the table has a sense of the Creator, and we all benefit from listening and weighing each others words and ideas as if they were directly from God. It is destructive when someone steps back and refuses participation or criticizes the decision.
 9. Take time to teach the process of corporate discernment. The lack of common understanding about the process of collaboration often prevents the real thing from happening. Don’t assume that everyone understands the process. Lengthy and tangential discussions may be brought to a more effective resolution when the group understands the nature of the corporate task at hand.

Conclusion

This can be a challenging process. It takes a tremendous amount of effort and time, both of which are tough to come by as the pressures of production rise. Nonetheless, it is still important to push and work toward truer and better collaboration. But if we ask for equal voice, then we must also bear equal responsibility doing the work at hand. This does not mean that we all take part in directing actor rehearsals or that we design by committee. We need to entrust one another with specific tasks, valuing each member’s skills and gifts. Among the artistic team there are different personalities, different perspectives, and certainly different experiences. But these diverse gifts are meant to come together in unity.¹¹ There is too much work for one person to do, and we are to charge one another to do her work, support her while she does it, and celebrate her when she has done it well.

Inevitably, this model will look different for each group of artists and for each show. There are a wide variety of organizational structures in Quaker meetings. Some have paid clergy and some do not. Some have programmed meetings for worship and some wait largely in silence. The exact structure we use is less important than how we embrace its core values.

- Attending Christ our Present Teacher. Inviting the Creator into our artistic process, and faithfully holding the script in the Light of Christ.

¹¹ Colin Saxton, “Friends Testimonies IV” (Sermon, North Valley Friends Church, Newberg, OR, 22 February, 2004).

- Fully investing in the process. Being present at all steps along the way, upholding our responsibilities, and offering our own ideas and insights when appropriate.
- Distinguishing between matters of preference and conscience. Continually releasing our egos and agendas to the group, seeking only the good of the show.
- Honoring “that of God” in our collaborators. Listening well to one another and weighing carefully each others words and ideas.

This approach of corporate discernment is just a model, so the results may not always be as full as we would wish. This is especially true in situations like educational theatre where unique deficiencies of student time, maturity, and investment can make it tough. It is easy in those situations to default to a hierarchical model where we can avoid stepping on toes or pass off responsibility to someone else and make our jobs easier. I suggest it is all the more important in the educational setting that we take time to teach this process. The results may be just a few shining moments of unity along the way, but the process is important if we are to make good collaborators for the future of theatre.

The Quaker way is not the one true way of decision making.¹² But the Friends model of corporate discernment helps foster an atmosphere conducive to the artistic and intuitive process of theatre. The goal of decision making in this process, then, is less an issue of deciding what to do and more a matter of listening for the still, clear voice of the Creator. Quakers have learned much about this process, and we as theatre artists have a great deal to learn from them. In the words of George Fox, “be swift to hear, and slow to speak, and let it be in the grace, which seasons all words.”¹³

¹² I sometimes wonder if there are times when a hierarchical model is the best choice, especially when there is a particularly brilliant director. I realize there are certainly weighty friends, and we do well to recognize brilliance when we see it. But we should not let this be an excuse for checking out and passing off the responsibility to someone else.

¹³ George Fox, “The Epistles of George Fox.” 136.

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