INTRODUCTION

Thanks to the research of workers in many disciplines, today we know something about the characteristics of good collaborative practice in face-to-face groups. In particular, it is now widely recognized that successful collaboration depends on much more than bringing smart people with bright ideas together in a room. Critically, it depends on a constructive process of social interaction among participants, in parallel to working with the content of problem-solving discourse. In recent years, much research has been devoted to identifying the specific kinds of social interaction associated with successful collaborative practices – those that consistently lead to positive outcomes such as group and individual learning, team satisfaction, commitment to decisions and high quality material products.

However, while we may have a better understanding of what good collaboration looks like, we know much less about where it comes from – i.e. how individuals and groups learn successful collaborative practice in the first place. This is partly due to the fact that most collaboration studies take the face-to-face collaborative activity itself as the primary unit of analysis. The typical method is to capture micro-interactional data and make assertions about social factors in collaborative discourse. But if we are concerned with the larger process of learning to collaborate, as opposed to the assessable end-products of such learning, we must widen our view beyond discourse practices of turn-taking, et cetera. We must take into account the sociocultural, historical and material contexts that give rise to situated collaborative practice.

To address the need for more research in this area, I propose to study how groups of people learn to collaborate through participation in communities of practice. As a first step, I have begun to examine the sociocultural history and practice of two established communities known for their strong “cultures of collaboration.” This choice is guided by the intuition that exemplary collaborative practice is more likely to emerge in the presence of such cultures. The goal is to understand how these cultures emerge, how they are embodied, and how they change over time.

The first is a student housing cooperative, Synergy House Cooperative, owned by and located on the campus of Stanford University in California, adjacent to Palo Alto. Generally referred to as the flagship cooperative among seven such student co-ops on the Stanford campus, Synergy was jointly founded in 1972 by administrators and students as the end-product of a project-based, student-facilitated course.
The second is a religious community affiliated with the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), and known as Palo Alto Friends Meeting (PAFM). While Quaker collaborative practice originated in mid-17th century Puritan England, the contemporary community under study was established in Palo Alto, California early in the twentieth century, persisting through today as an active religious and community service organization.

Provisional Conceptual Framework

In advance of implementing the proposed research program, it is naturally difficult to articulate an explanatory theory of data yet-to-be-seen. However, a researcher can often recognize and articulate the provisional conceptual framework that motivates data gathering activities in the first place. This framework inevitably prioritizes certain phenomena over others within the ethnographer’s wide field of view; it also reflects underlying assumptions and biases that result from participation in the scholar’s own community of practice. So in the interests of sharing my motivations for this research and disclosing my conceptual biases, here is a synopsis of my own speculative framework for understanding and explaining how participants in communities of practice learn to collaborate with each other.

1. Collaborative practice is situated in sociohistoric time and thus emerges from the cultural context of the community in which it is embedded.

2. Collaborative practice is generated by social processes that embody a community’s “culture of collaboration.”

3. Communities with strong cultures of collaboration are “mindful of process,” in that collaboration processes are made explicit and thus become mutable objects of collaborative discourse.

I believe the two communities I’m proposing to study exemplify an attitude toward their collaborative practice which I am calling “mindful of process.” That is, they not only spend time working with the details of particular subject-domains, problems and decisions; they also spend a great deal of time reflecting on the quality and structure of their own collaborative processes, working to continually adapt and improve them in response to ongoing experience.

My primary research objective is to understand how social learning occurs in a community that is mindful of process. The hope in any ethnographic study is that the results
will generalize beyond the situated special case and thereby inform understanding of other, analogous situations. In doing so I hope to shed light on some of the following questions:

❖ Does a community that is mindful of process differ in significant ways from other kinds of communities of practice?

❖ What and how do people learn as participants in process-mindful communities?

❖ How are newcomers socialized into developing their own collaborative capacities in the community context and what role do oldtimers play in this process?

❖ Where and how are collaboration norms explicitly embodied?

❖ How does process-mindfulness produce and reproduce a culture of collaboration?

❖ Can a culture of collaboration be intentionally designed into a new community?

❖ Can and do collaborative capacities acquired through participation in one community transfer to another?

This research proposal is structured as follows: first, I share the motivations for and issues involved in researching collaboration in communities of practice, bringing in relevant background research on collaboration in formal and informal learning environments; next, I share the proposed research agenda and methodologies, intended to address my research questions and inform a principled analytic framing of the resulting data; the last two sections, which form the bulk of the paper, present narratives and analysis for each subject community’s history and practice, based on my preliminary fieldwork.

BACKGROUND

Communities of Practice

Collaboration is essential to life-long and life-wide learning and a key component of participation in both formal and informal settings. In this paper, I’m using the theoretical framework of “community of practice” (CoP) as a way to understand how people learn to collaborate by participating in communities.

Communities of practice are sustained groups of people organized around a shared endeavor, where learning is viewed as a social process of legitimate peripheral participation in authentic community practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This is in contrast to the traditional, narrow view of learning as acquisition of knowledge and skill through didactic instruction or
restricted participation in formal institutions. The framework thus embraces socially-organized informal learning environments as important sites of learning.

Legitimate peripheral participation describes the natural process by which one moves from newcomer to oldtimer in a community of practice by being granted gradually increasing access to authentic practice, which in turn transforms one’s identity from peripheral to central participant. Participants have access to individuals with a variety of expertise levels and activities which call for different levels of participation. Analogous to Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), participants always have access to a level of practice that will bring them into fuller membership in the community. Over time, this centripetal participation by newcomers-turned-oldtimers reproduces the community of practice with new membership. Communities of practice are an important site for collaboration studies because, in contrast to short-lived or one-off collaborative endeavors, collaborations in communities of practice are situated in the ongoing sociocultural history of the community and exhibit a high degree of consistency in participants across time and activity.

Lave confesses that participation in real communities of practice is often not so clear-cut in the historically-situated world. In particular, communities that exist within, or in any relation to, formal institutions, experience discontinuities that disrupt the otherwise seamless CoP model. Formal institutions like workplaces and schools impose artificial structures that commodify learning – focusing on knowledgeable skill as an assembly-line product of activities in space and time. Whereas the transformation of identity in communities of practice plays the major role in giving meaning to knowledge and skill development, in formal institutions, personal identity is severely de-emphasized in the structures of activity. This leads to alienation since activity is not authentically pursued for its own sake, but as a product for export outside the activity context, e.g. building widgets in order to earn a wage. Similarly, schooling and other formal learning environments abstract learning from authentic situated activity, e.g. learning to critically analyze texts that have no connection to other learner activities or identities. This partially explains the recent rise of interest in lifelong and life-wide learning due to the wide inclusion of informal environments, where participation ties the acquisition of knowledgeable skill to the transformation of identity in the course of participation in authentic practice.
A recognition of the discontinuities inherent to real communities of practice makes it apparent that the standard CoP is an idealized model, one that no community situated in the cultural, historical, material world could ever fully conform to. So a sociocultural analysis of situated communities of practice should (1) identify those aspects of participation which closely approximate the ideal model, and (2) characterize those formal and/or institutional sources of discontinuity that circumscribe participation in deviation from the ideal. In her own work, Lave (1991) emphasized natural apprenticeship in different cultures as exemplars for communities of practice. She uses Mayan midwifery and Alcoholics Anonymous as two exemplars. Perhaps it’s no coincidence that the central practice of both is constrained by the human body – the practice of helping a pregnant woman deliver a newborn, the practice of living with chemical dependence. The body is one of the most pervasive and least obvious constraints on participation. In the case of Mayan midwifery, we could say that the pregnant mother’s reproductive process circumscribes participation by a novice midwife. In an ideal community of practice, participants may voluntarily participate in more central practices when they are ready. In reality, a birth occurs on its own time frame whether a midwife feels ready or not. If it’s the case that no situated community could possibly fulfill the ideal model of CoP, then all communities are varyingly constrained by sociocultural, institutional, biological or other limits. We can still make arguments that some CoPs are more, or less, so constrained – more, or less, prototypical of the framework. We can imagine a spectrum of formality and make rough estimations or comparisons for communities along it.

**Collaboration Discourse**

A core mission for an institution of higher learning is the education of its undergraduate students. Formally, this mission plays out in the classroom, where learned professors transmit discipline-specific knowledge to students in lecture format or via discussion in smaller seminars. Lectures conform to a more traditional, assembly-line model of education (Rogoff, 2003). Seminars, in contrast, are sites of collaborative learning that engage students in authentic scholastic activity and thus are more in line with progressive notions of education (Dewey, 1958; Greeno, 2006).

In the university seminar, as in many other contexts, all participants are considered equally entitled to participate in collaborative discourse. However, individual differences in social, cultural and cognitive backgrounds mean groups rarely exhibit truly egalitarian participation structures; members are differentially positioned as more or less competent,
more or less willing to make or critique proposals, and more or less likely to accept others’
contributions (Goffman, 1981). As a result, group dynamics can vary widely depending on
the individual dispositions of participants. Since collaborating groups are presumably
engaged in goal-directed activity of some kind, we may ask whether or not some
participation structures and their associated dynamics lead to more successful outcomes, on
average. Intuitively we know that some collaborations succeed in achieving their stated goals
while others fail miserably. Most of us have experienced both outcomes first-hand.

The benefits of group work are many, and not only with respect to the particular
problem at hand. The interactions themselves activate learning processes (Cohen, 1994) as
students discuss and critique course topics, articulate and challenge each others’
interpretations, and negotiate differing perspectives through argumentation (Amigues, 1988;
Webb, 1995).

Collaboration research highlight social-interactional factors as critical to positive
collaboration outcomes. By and large these factors relate to patterns of interaction in group
discourse. Barron’s (2003) work on the influence of collaborative interactions on problem-
solving outcomes is particularly relevant to the present research proposal. She found three
general factors that helped to explain variability in the success of collaborative groups.

(1) Management of joint attention is critical to the creation of a common problem
space and basis for understanding;

(2) speakers and listeners both play active roles in collaboration as willingness to
discuss other’s proposals and voice one’s own proposals are critical to coordination of
group discourse; and

(3) successful collaborators develop and attend to two problem spaces simultaneously:
a content space (the subject material being discussed) and a relational space (the
interactional challenges and opportunities that condition discussion).

Greeno (2006) reports that “interactional studies have identified important patterns
of conversational interaction—patterns of turn-taking, opening and closing of topics, and
mechanisms of repair in response to apparent misunderstanding.” This echoes Barron’s
finding of significant differences between more and less successful groups in the way that
partners responded to correct proposals. “Groups that did well engaged the ideas of
participants, had low rates of ignoring or rejecting, paid attention to attention, and echoed
the ideas of one another,” (Barron, 2003).
Mindful of Process

Barron’s last item (3) is particularly powerful in the context of my proposed research project for the notion of a relational space makes clear that interactional practices are constructed by the participants and can be objects of learning in and of themselves. This is a necessary step if students are to eventually attain professional vision in the domain of scholarly discussion:

Central to the social and cognitive organization of a profession is its ability to shape events in the domain of its scrutiny into the phenomenal objects around which the discourse of the profession is organized. (Goodwin, 1994).

Central participants in sustained communities of practice can be viewed as having developed professional vision for the central activities they engage in. For communities organized around collaborative discourse activities, having professional vision is synonymous with being “mindful of process.”

Because I am concerned with how successful collaboration is learned, it would also be important to be able to link the enforcing of collaboration norms with learning. It seems plausible that active attendance to the relational space serves as this bridge because only then can the collaboration process itself become an object of discourse. The student subjects in Lizzio & Wilson’s (2005) empirical study of self-managed learning groups in higher education identified seven process domains they perceived as relevant to the success of their collaborative participation, including among them task focus, process learning, managing differences of opinion, equity and responsibility, collaboration and cooperation. Here we see Barron’s indicators of successful collaboration self-reported by students reflecting on the relational space. Drennon & Cervero (2002) report in their empirical study of adult literacy groups the difficulty experienced by facilitators of simultaneously negotiating the educational content of collaboration and the interpersonal power dynamics that accompany it. Again we see Barron’s dual problem space echoed.

It is in the relational space that participation structures form, where agency may be distributed differentially, and individuals are positioned with regard to competence, authority, willingness to initiate or critique proposals, and voice interpretations (Greeno, 2006). Kyratzis (2004) similarly reports that displaying expertise and opposing others’ claims to expertise play a role in negotiating peer group status. With such differentiation of participation, collaborative learning outcomes can vary dramatically such that some groups
are more successful than others, which is precisely what Barron found, even when controlling for prior knowledge.

From a sociocultural perspective, we’re led to ask: “What communities were the individuals in these collaboration studies participating in?” A transient one lasting as long as the experimental session? A school, workplace or other formal institutional environment? For the groups in these studies, to what degree was there a shared sense of membership in a community with a common center? Would the results of these studies have differed if the collaborators had been members of an authentic community of practice with a shared sense of identity and a shared notion of what participation meant and what forms it should take? Clearly, the centripetal participation of individuals in a community of practice normalizes participation behavior by giving meaning to practice through common identity.

Why do different individuals participate in collaborative discourse differently? How did they learn to collaborate? Is direct, assembly-line instruction an appropriate way to learn collaborative discourse practice? The communities of practice perspective would say no; learning to become a more effective participant means learning to talk rather than learning from talk (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Barron points out that collaborative communications skills taught outside of authentic collaborative practice are not likely to enhance subject-specific, joint-thinking practices. She suggests instead that research should look at how norms of accountability to collaborators are fostered. What role does sociocultural context play in shaping collaborative practice?

Stephenson (2002) compared collaborative mathematics learning in two schools; one was a traditional school that emphasized individual work and lecture-based instruction; the other was a magnet school that used cooperative, project-based instruction. Using Barron’s (2003) coding scheme, students in the traditional school had high rates of ignoring and rejecting collaborator proposals while students from the magnet school had high rates of acceptance and discussion. It’s not clear to what extent the schools’ different cultures contributed to the differences in collaboration styles or whether they could be attributed to differing amounts of previous practice in collaborative problem solving. One possibility is that these norms are created outside the classroom walls in informal social contexts and then transferred in to classroom discussion. If so, it would make sense to look for groups in informal settings that exhibit Barron’s markers of successful collaboration, where there exist strong norms: of accountability between speakers and listeners, management of joint
attention, and conscious attendance to the development of a relational space – i.e. a culture of collaboration.

In recognizing the importance of sociocultural context in understanding how collaborative practice emerges among face-to-face groups, this paper proposes new research to investigate how participants in sustained communities of practice learn to collaborate. The following section briefly outlines the agenda and methodology for pursuing this goal.

**RESEARCH AGENDA & METHODOLOGY**

I’m proposing to examine how individuals learn to collaborate through their legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice. Because my focus is collaboration, I’m choosing communities where collaboration is central to community identity and activities. Further than that, however, I’m particularly interested in communities who are reflective on their own norms for collaborative practice. This suggests studying a community with a certain level of formality since it presupposes that norms have been made somewhat explicit as objects of discourse. At the same time, it would be less than ideal to focus on a community so formalized that its classification as a community of practice is suspect.

The two sites I’m proposing to study are interesting examples of communities of practice, who differ in their levels of formality and the extent to which they are embedded in institutional contexts.

**Methodology**

I have begun to use (and propose to continue using) a mixture of qualitative research methods as a way of getting both a broad overview of the community’s sociocultural history, as well as a microscopic view on realtime community behaviors. For the macroscopic view, I’m using historic analysis of primary and secondary sources in addition to methods drawn from organizational behavior and analysis. For the microscopic view, I am engaging with both of the proposed research communities as a participant-observer taking fieldnotes; in some cases, it may become possible to capture audio and/or photographic data directly from the source site.

Thus far, I have collected seven sessions of fieldnotes from the Quaker site, each session lasting between one-and-a-half and three hours, through participation in two kinds of collaborative discourse, known as Meeting for Worship and Meeting for Business. Based
on my preliminary data gathering, in the next two sections I’d like to share the cultural history and contemporary practices of these communities, along with brief fieldnote sketches of the participants and activities which give them life. These sections will also engage in analysis of what’s presented, primarily from a communities of practice perspective. In particular I focus on socializing forces operating in the community – ways of participating that transform participant identities from newcomers into oldtimers. In communities of practice, these are activities and artifacts that offer access to authentic practice.

**Synergy House Cooperative**

*Overview*

As an exemplar of collaborative interaction in a student cooperative residence, I chose to begin my research at the Synergy Cooperative on the campus of Stanford University. The Synergy House Cooperative is one of seven student cooperatives on the campus, about fifty miles south of San Francisco, California. It was one of two original cooperatives founded in the early 1970s on the campus by students and administrators sensitive to the countercultural currents of the time. It is housed in a three story farmhouse on a small hill, surrounded by trees and gardens, quite removed from other student residences. A communal dinner for the approximately twenty residents and twenty auxiliary community members is prepared by a rotating cook crew on Sunday through Thursday evenings. This is but one of many weekly rotating chores that every community member is responsible for; these chores include cooking, cleaning the kitchen and bathrooms, tending and developing the gardens, and preparing homemade foods like bread, hummus and granola.

On a weekly basis, house residents hold a meeting to make announcements, discuss current community issues and make collective decisions. Meetings are highly structured and conform to a formal discussion model, known as Consensus, originally adapted from the deliberative processes of Quakers. The weekly Consensus meeting is the center of collaborative discourse in the house.

Due to the institutional context, house membership fluctuates after each school term, especially at the start of a new school year. At the Synergy Co-op, the gender ratio typically hovers around an even split. Ages are predominantly in the undergraduate range from 19 to 22 years, although older graduate students may also live there. Stanford undergraduates are generally well above average in terms of socioeconomic status and educational preparedness.
Co-op Community of Practice

Synergy members all participate in the shared practice of fulfilling basic living needs for a household of students: planning, purchasing for, and preparing meals; maintaining sanitary kitchen and bathrooms; keeping common areas clean and usable for dining, working, community meetings, socializing. In addition to these more formalized practices, participants are at all times surrounded by opportunities for participating in informal practices that reinforce the identity of being a “good” co-op member. These may include tidying up communal spaces voluntarily, unloading the dish sanitizer, baking cookies for the house, throwing a tea party, giving a musical performance or holding a skill-share.

There are frequent opportunities for members to engage in peripheral participation in proximity to other participants who may be relatively more expert or novice, with opportunities to exchange knowledgeable skill. Learning is explicitly valued as a goal for community participation and participants are encouraged to share their unique passions, expertises and interests with each other. The particular content of is of little import; it is the act of intentional participation in the interests of community building that is valued. Some past skill-shares include: bread baking, fire building and safety, beer brewing, massage, sexual health, knot tying, confection making, carpentry, underwater basket-weaving.

The normal daily conduct of the community offers many sites of activity where varieties of informal apprenticeship occur. As an illustration: bread baking, a near-nightly kitchen activity, is frequently a source of anxiety for newcomers. Typically, bread baking oldtimers are called upon to help the novice through the process. As they learn to make bread, they participate directly in feeding and nourishing the community, fulfilling their weekly commitment to the house, and thus practice the identity of participating member.

Another illustrative example of legitimate peripheral participation in the Synergy House Cooperative is the collaborative practice of preparing the evening meal five nights per week. Once every three months, each member is called to be a “head cook” in charge of a dinner. They design the meal, ensure the food is ordered on time by the student kitchen manager, and lead a cook crew of three others to prepare and serve the meal. Like bread baking, this is a frequent source of anxiety for newcomers, as they are called to provide a meal that feeds approximately sixty people, on time, meets their nutritional needs, and composed of ingredients available in the current season. Long before members reach this point of central practice, they have been legitimate peripheral participants in the cook
process: serving on other cook crews, pitching in a helping hand to bring dishes out to the serving table, eating and enjoying other well-received meals, hearing other members discuss their head cook experiences. This prior intent participation (Rogoff, 1991) prepares individuals for their own head cook through more and less central forms of participation in the creation of a meal.

**Consensus Decision-Making**

Synergy House is run by Consensus, which refers to a particular formalized decision making process used by cooperatives and other intentional communities around the world. Consensus is a secularized form of the process used by Quakers in their Meetings for Business. Though it has a several formal definitions, the actual situated activities are as varied as the communities that practice them. What is more or less common to all processes is the notion that decision outcomes are consented to, willingly, by all participants, without coercion. This is in contrast to voting systems like majority rule, where decisions are made without the full consent of all participants. In Consensus, discussion continues until even participants with minority viewpoints concede that their concerns have been heard and addressed by the group with due diligence. Though this usually takes much longer to accomplish than voting, participants in Consensus-based communities feel that unanimous consent (note this is not unanimous agreement) leads to greater commitment to decision outcomes by all parties instead of alienating those with minority views.

Newcomers to Synergy experience Consensus for the first time at the mandatory “Rooming Meeting” which kicks off the start of each quarterly school term. Over the course of several hours, rooms are allocated among groups of residents using the Consensus process. The process for Rooming Meeting is somewhat atypical for a Consensus meeting, uniquely structured to support a complicated resource allocation problem. Because Consensus was designed to support discussion and decision around pre-existing proposals, it doesn’t necessarily lend itself well to the room assignment problem, which involves parallel optimization across many interlocking subproblems (one for each resident, theoretically), with often conflicting constraints. In this case, the constraints are participants’ individual preferences for roommates and room assignments. Roughly sixty people need to allocate themselves to twenty-one single, double, triple and quad rooms.

This first exposure to Consensus is, in the spirit of an initiation, longer and more grueling than any other decision to be faced during the rest of the school term. The task takes
typically between five and seven hours, whereas most Consensus meetings last no longer than two hours. While the structure and duration of Rooming Meeting is atypical, it does expose newcomers to typical conflict scenarios encountered in the course of practice, the ways conflicts are resolved through dialogue, how needs are balanced and evaluated, how emotional tensions are managed, and the affordances of visual representations for creating joint attention and common ground over the course of extended discourse.

After reaching consensus on room allocations, newcomers are encouraged to participate in the weekly Consensus decision meetings where new community policies are formed and existing policy is adapted. Consensus as a formal process that attempts to create an egalitarian participation structure where all individuals have equal access to contributing to group discourse. Newcomers are as free as anyone else to ask questions, make proposals, comment on proposals or voice concerns. However, oldtimers usually speak more openly and more often in these meetings. The facilitator, depending on the formality of their style, may try to temper this inequality by encouraging others to speak. However, the lack of any visible indicators for the relative experience of participants – as well as the average lack of experience with Consensus in general among any given crop of residents – means newcomers may participate in inappropriate ways with no regulation, feedback or normalizing force.

If norms are reproduced through the practice of Consensus, then even behavior that may at one time have been transgressive, may be setting the norm. An excess of unresolved conflicts or negative emotions may instigate responses in order to regulate: instituting a “vibes watcher” role in the meeting to call attention to and diffuse emotional tensions before they run amok; holding a process-centric meeting to reflect on the current norms operating in the practice of Consensus and collectively evaluating interventions or modifications in order to improve. These process meetings are the primary regulator when group satisfaction with Consensus runs low. It’s the chance to discuss process norms directly, rather than take time away from already lengthy meetings.

Some frequent problems with Consensus that get addressed in these process meetings: overly-long meetings, lack of attendance, dominance by a few participants, lack of strong facilitation, lack of clear process, poor time management, lack of common ground, no shared understanding of the criteria for a proper Consensus decision outcome.
Digital Media Enable Central Participation from the Periphery

Digital media play an increasingly central role in mediating participation in the Synergy House community of practice. A community-authored wiki, Synpaedia (2008), mediates asynchronous apprenticeship for learning practices like making granola and hummus, soaking beans, unclogging toilets, or cleaning cast iron cookware. The wiki is also the home of Synergy history, bylaws, and definitions of cultural rituals like “snaps”1 or “fist of five”2.

Over the past few years, as laptop computers have become ubiquitous among the university’s student body, students have grown accustomed to interacting over email throughout the day. In this same span of time, the Synergy email listserv (“the list”) has become the most vibrant medium for community-wide dialogue. It has emerged from being an adjunct information source to being a central practice of participation in the community. It is a forum for voicing public grievances and soapbox-style rants, clarifying and debating community policies, publicizing personal quarrels, announcing events, lost and found, and making snarkish commentary on all of the above.

What’s particularly interesting from a communities of practice perspective is the corresponding shift in the participant population that has accompanied this transition to digital discourse. Before, participation in community discourse was limited to those physically present in the house. With the transition to email, individuals can now participate from anywhere in the world, and they do. This has re-opened a new level of participation to oldtimers who no longer reside in Synergy House, ranging from active non-resident community members to distant alumni who live on other continents. It is not uncommon for oldtimers in China or the Middle East to comment on otherwise unremarkable resident-specific communiques, like a request to borrow a car or announcement about a lost shoe. However, the most characteristic time for “distant” oldtimers to participate is when a community crisis occur and email debates break out on the listserv.

At such times, from around the world and down through the generations, oldtimers weigh in by sharing their insights based on accumulated experiences from when they were

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1 A way to indicate agreement during a consensus meeting, without disrupting the meeting’s flow, by physically snapping one’s fingers. More generally, a way of showing approval or appreciation for altruistic behavior, e.g. for helping to unload the dish sanitizer, another member may give “snaps” verbally.

2 A technique to test for consensus during decision making meetings, where formal voting is prohibited. Every participant holds up one hand, where the number of fingers indicate the degree of support for the current proposal.
residents. They often counsel that the particular crisis is normal and has happened before. This remote participation by oldtimers could be termed central practice from the periphery. Though they have moved on and are not personally known to current residents – and thus not necessarily even recognized as central participants – they continue to monitor the email discussions and continue to participate as it suits them. In times of conflict, they position current crisis in the light of otherwise inaccessible historical context.

Due to the high resident turnover rate and the transience of studentship, organizational memory is short and not well preserved or transferred across annual school cycles. These are some of the discontinuities created by the cooperative's institutional context (discussed in more detail below). In contrast, the email list has enabled a new kind of continuity for oldtimers to participate in ongoing community discourse, a discourse which used to be accessible only to current, physically collocated residents. Not only has the email list expanded access to participation by oldtimers, it has conversely expanded access to oldtimers by newcomers, who thereby learn to more capably handle emergent crises. Overall, this expanded access reinforces the process by which the community is reproduced.

Institutional Discontinuities
The Synergy House Cooperative’s institutional context undermines its collective cultural identity of “intentional community.” Intentional communities are autonomous, self-governing, self-defining affinity groups who, similar to communities of practice, align around shared meaning and activity (Kanter, 1972). Membership is voluntary and solely determined by the community. In contrast, Synergy House and the land it sits on are owned by a large, private University, and integrated into the institutionalized student housing system. Members for a given year are chosen by an annual lottery that takes place in Spring. Students register their ranked preferences for where they want to live the following year and the lottery determines the order in which those preferences are considered. Assignments are made by computer using an algorithm that is not public. For a community of practice, this external process of selecting participants is severely discontinuous. In no way does it serve the reproduction of the community or support centripetal participation by newcomers developing into oldtimers.

University ownership of the land and house also means residents can’t fix, improve upon, or otherwise modify the house or its major infrastructure. In contrast to a community where participants take responsibility for maintenance tasks and, in the process, learn
knowledgeable skill, Synergy members are not given access to this practice and so don’t learn from this potentially rich opportunity. This may partly explain why the house’s wood shop and tool shed are seldom used. Though these resources are well equipped, there are few activities that offer legitimate participation in carpentry or maintenance in the course of authentic practice. While there have been several skill-shares on the use of these resources, these are more formal learning opportunities that demand individual initiative outside the structure of normal community practice.

Another consequence of the University’s ownership is that the house is closed during Winter and Summer vacation breaks in the academic year. In Winter, that means current residents don’t have access to their own rooms or possessions. In Summer, the year’s residents must completely vacate the premises of all personal possessions. Cooperatively-owned items such as kitchen appliances are stored away for the Summer. During both breaks, the premises are locked and regularly patrolled by campus police.

The Synergy Cooperative has a staff of student “managers”, instituted by the University housing system. Though the cooperative has adapted this mandate to allow the staff to be chosen in a way that reflects community norms for decision making, namely Consensus, the participants in the management selection process can be anyone, in or outside the community. In the past, outsiders have infiltrated the staff by coercion and instituted drastic changes to house policy. This occurred for a time in the mid-1980s, when a group repealed the long-standing policy of allowing no meat in the house. Another discoordination with respect to the student managers is the fact that their position means they must play dual roles – community participant and institutional employee – which are often in conflict in terms of policy and demands. Managers are legitimate participants in the cooperative, but also legally accountable to the university and state.

In this connection, house policies created and consented to by the community exist within the larger framework of university policy. Again, these may be in direct contradiction with each other as the community makes choices that adhere or deviate from university norm. Whereas university policies are created by institutions external to Synergy, without regard to the authentic, situated practices of any particular student residence, Synergy’s policies must, by nature, take into account the actual lived world of the community. That means policies exist to regulate behavior that is not even allowed according to the university, such as drug use, underage drinking and long-term house guests. Since these are activities
that take place regardless of university restrictions, the Synergy community legitimizes and regulates these forms of participation in ways that align with its culture, rather than introduce the disruption of another institutional discontinuity.

In summary, the Synergy House Cooperative is a community of practice that is highly embedded in the institutional constraints of a university. While processes of oldtimer-newcomer informal apprenticeship are quite evident, the reproduction of the community over time is severely circumscribed by the institution. However, we see evidence that digital media have enabled a new kind of practice for physically peripheral, but culturally central, oldtimers. This serves to strengthen the continuity of culture over time.

An Aside: Historical Links between Synergy House Cooperative and the Quakers

In the course of researching how the Synergy Cooperative was founded at Stanford University, I uncovered a direct historical trajectory that links Synergy's founding to participants at Palo Alto Friends Meeting and the larger Quaker community in the San Francisco Bay Area.

I've already said that Synergy's Consensus model of deliberation and decision making is a secularized form of Quaker Meeting for Business (Butler & Rothstein, 1991). It closely follows Quaker practice, minus the spirituality. However, it's unclear how the Consensus process was instituted at Synergy in the first place. It is likely that I've discovered the historical thread to shed light on this. The thread is actually one man: Alan Strain (b. 1924, d. 2003), late member of Palo Alto Friends Meeting, the former Associate Dean of Student Affairs and draft counselor at Stanford University, known for his commitment to social justice (Palmer, 2003; Obituaries, 2003).

Strain became a Quaker and conscientious objector during World War II, serving alternative service on a boys ranch in the San Fernando Valley. He attended Stanford as an undergraduate, majoring in Psychology, then went on to earn his teaching credential from the School of Education. He taught elementary school in Woodside, CA, and, from the early 1950s to early 1960s, taught at and served as principal for Peninsula School in Menlo Park. In 1961, he helped found Pacific High School in Palo Alto (1961 - 1978), teaching there until he left to become the Western field secretary for the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors. His draft counseling duties included working with the Stanford student body, and in 1971 he joined the Dean of Students office there as Director of Special Services, in charge of all draft counseling at Stanford. It is estimated that, around this time,
42% of the Stanford male population were registered Conscientious Objectors, in large part due to the work of Alan Strain (Altenberg, 1988). When the Vietnam War ended, Strain was appointed Associate Dean of Student Affairs and went on to organize the first Inter-tribal Pow Wow at Stanford (an annual event that continues today). He was active in the Society of Friends throughout his adult life, serving on the National Board of the American Friends Service Committee, and active in both the Palo Alto and Santa Cruz Friends Meetings.

In addition to playing an instrumental role in supporting the student draft resistance on the Stanford campus, Alan had a very direct part in starting and shaping the Synergy Cooperative. In 1971, he was the principal initiator of a student-facilitated course on alternative lifestyles which culminated in Synergy’s founding. The course was organized in response to a need felt by many students who became Conscientious Objectors at that time. According to a

“The moral commitment to non-violence and social change made many want to figure out how to live their whole lives ‘conscientiously’, to integrate their moral commitment into their careers and lifestyles.”

(Altenberg, 1988)

In response to this aspiration among students he worked with, Alan Strain organized a course titled “New Vocations and New Life Styles” in 1971; the action project of this course was “Project Synergy”, whose aim was to establish an on-campus counseling and resource center on emerging alternatives for living and working in modern society. (Baer et al, 1990)

Around the same time, an on-campus, independent fraternity named Beta Chi, long associated with the Stanford bohemian and drug cultures, was evicted from their house; this fact was brought to the attention of Alan Strain by then-Dean of Residential Education, Larry Horton, who arranged to have Project Synergy take over the house and implement their vision, described thus:

“Our attempt is to create here and now at the Stanford community a society we envision where co-operative relationships and collective actions are encouraged, where all the aspects of our lives can be integrated. ... [Synergy House] has been organized around the theme of alternatives. ...Here people will live and work together to create a community integrating work, study and interpersonal relationships and maintaining close contact with other alternatives.”

(Baer et al, 1990)

This historical connection between the Synergy Cooperative and Quakers serves as an illustration of how collaborative process can transfer across cultural and institutional
boundaries. This particular instance highlights how the institutional constraints of a large university modify and circumscribe the secularized Quaker practice. In the next section, I’ll share the origins of that practice and how they operate in the context of a non-secular, yet non-doctrinal, religious community of practice.

**Quakers as a Community of Practice**

*History of the Religious Society of Friends*

What we know today as Quakerism started as a radical fringe movement in the northern counties of Puritan England in 1652. The most charismatic and influential personality in this movement was George Fox, who, at twenty-eight, started his public ministry when he discovered, after a long, intensive search, that no priest or preacher could, as he put it, “speak to my condition.” The radical notion at the center of the movement was the idea that divine wisdom and morality could be discerned through direct personal experience of “that of God in you.” Consequently, all religious mediators – whether priests, sacred texts, or religious doctrines – were unnecessary, or at best, secondary, for living a religious and moral life. The Quaker theological viewpoint was one extreme of the larger Puritan movement, which espoused a return to “purity” in religious practice, eschewing the complicated rituals and rites of the church establishment of the time. With the New Testament having been printed in English for the first time only twenty-five years previous, the Puritans represented the resulting social movement towards democratized access to spiritual discourse. No longer were Latin-educated priests necessary intermediaries. Quakers took this democratizing movement to its logical, radical, extreme.

Fox and his cohorts traveled widely, giving public testimony in support of their unorthodox point of view. Their habit was to stand up in the back of a church or on its steps after the sermon and preach to the congregation. After sermonizing on the direct inward connection to truth, they would invite listeners to a local Meeting. These early Meetings would take place in peoples’ homes, barns or other informal spaces.

In only four years, the Quaker movement spread to the rest of England, Ireland, Holland, Germany, France, and the American colonies. Quakers’ rejection of church establishments and obedience to conscience rather than legal institutions caused them much persecution in England and the American colonies. They suffered frequent imprisonment, fines and personal abuse as a result. The Act of Toleration in 1689 brought legal protection
from most of these troubles, though Quakers still suffered at the hands and words of their contemporaries. (Brinton, 2002)

Quakers have had many names, including Friends of the Truth, Publishers of Truth, Seekers of Truth, Religious Society of Friends, and Society of Friends. The official name of the modern Quaker institution is the Religious Society of Friends, and participants are typically referred to as Friends. The nickname “Quaker” was originally a slur derogating what George Fox called Friends’ tendency to “tremble at the word of God.” Today, “Quaker” is still a common nickname, used by Friends and non-Friends alike.

Quakerism spread rapidly after its arrival in the American colonies. Whenever a new Quaker Meetinghouse was built, it was accompanied by an adjacent burial grounds and school. To this day, Quakers are well known for their schools, counting Haverford, Swarthmore, Earlham, Guilford, and Whittier colleges among many.

Early Quakers were known to travel far to give ministry in new lands or where Quakers were already settled. In some places they were welcomed; in others, they were jailed, driven out of town, or even hanged. These traveling ministers and their visits were instrumental in keeping alive a sense of common community among scattered Quakers.

The 1700s saw slavery become a major concern of Quakers in both England and the colonies. Through internal revelations and the traveling ministry of John Woolman, participants in Quaker Meetings began, step-by-step, to agree to change their involvement with slavery. By the end of the 18th century, due to public preaching, individual conscience and the disowning of those who would not comply, no member of the Society of Friends owned or imported slaves.

Technically a branch of Protestantism, early Quakers considered themselves Christian. However, contemporary Quakers may identify as Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Atheist or otherwise.

From its inception the Quaker movement has offered critiques of many accepted manifestations of Christianity while at the same time empathizing with people of other faiths. We might use the phrase “primitive Christianity” to describe more closely where Friends fit across the Christian spectrum. Primitive Christianity usually refers to those teachings which pre-date Fourth Century Christians... These earliest followers of Jesus were radical revolutionaries, representing a ‘new order’ of faithful who lived communally, eschewed violence of all kinds, and practiced simplicity.

(PYM Faith & Practice, 2001)
Contemporary Quaker Practice

Palo Alto Friends Meeting\(^3\) (PAFM) is an affiliate of Pacific Yearly Meeting, which includes Quaker communities in California, Hawaii, Nevada, Guatemala and Mexico. Pacific Yearly Meeting is one of thirty-three Yearly Meetings in North America, among fifty worldwide. The first annual gathering of Pacific Yearly Meeting took place at Palo Alto in the summer of 1947, with twelve member Meetings attending. Pacific Yearly Meeting sends annual Epistles\(^4\) to all Yearly Meetings in the world and receives similar communications from Friends around the globe. (PYM Faith & Practice, 2001)

What follows is a description of typical practice at Palo Alto Friends Meeting (PAFM) on a Sunday morning, interspersed with fieldnotes describing the event from a participant-observer’s perspective.

Will and I carpool to the Meeting on this Sunday morning and park on the street out front. It is 10:29am, one minute before the scheduled start of the Quaker Meeting for Worship. As we walk up the drive, we pass and greet a few Friends heading into the old Meetinghouse, where the children, youth and teens attend First Day School. We enter the new Meetinghouse along with several other just-arriving Friends and grab our name tags from the rack on the left. The Greeter, a woman in her seventies, stands by the open Meeting room door and smiles as I walk through it.

PAFM Meeting for Worship, February 10, 2008

Participants (members, attenders and visitors) arrive in advance of the regular Meeting time (10:30AM) and enter the New Meetinghouse. The Old Meetinghouse houses First Day School, where kids, youth and teens work with volunteers on educational and art activities while the adults attend Meeting for Worship. When participants enter the New Meetinghouse foyer, a Friend appointed to be Greeter for the day smiles and quietly greets them. If the new arrival is a newcomer, he or she is given a disposable name tag to write on and affix. The Greeter inquires if the newcomer has been to a Friends Meeting before and, if not, offers a card with basic information on participating in Meeting for Worship. Members and regular attenders retrieve their reusable tags from a swivel rack just inside the door. The door to the Meeting room stands open to the foyer for arrivals to enter. At 10:30AM sharp,

\(^3\) In Quaker parlance, the noun “Meeting” may refer interchangeably to the Quaker community as a whole (as in, “This Meeting was established in 1920.”), or to the specific worshipful practice engaged in by participants on a regular basis (“Did you go to Meeting today?”). This reflects the centrality of practice in Quaker identity.

\(^4\) A public letter of greeting and ministry. Such letters are sent from a Friends Meeting or organization to other Friend groups, to supply information, spiritual insight, and encouragement. (PYM, 2001)
The Greeter will gently close it. Those who arrive late will be admitted in groups once every few minutes.

The seats of the Meeting room are eighty-percent full and I look around for a place to sit. Seeing a stretch of open seats on the right, two rows from the back, I walk around the outside to get to it. My friend, Will, follows. There’s one woman sitting at the end of the row of five seats, and I make a snap decision to sit right next to her, rather than leaving a gap. I recall this being the norm at Santa Cruz Meeting, where I was first introduced to Quakerism. Once seated I look around to confirm my intuition about the social distance norm but actually see quite a number of gaps, some in the act of being created as other arrivals seat themselves. Will sits two seats over, leaving a gap between us. The Greeter unstops the double door and lets it close quietly. The Meeting has officially begun.

PAFM Meeting for Worship, February 10, 2008

The seats of the Meeting room are arranged in two crescents facing each other around a common center. The chairs are well-padded and comfortable, compared to the hard wooden pews of traditional Meetinghouses on the East Coast. When the Meeting begins, the group descends into a sustained silence.

There is no minister, priest or other hierarchical authority in a Quaker community. In the deep silence of a Meeting, if someone feels moved strongly enough to break that silence and speak, they do so. Speakers stand, if they are able, and address the group so that all may hear. For that moment, they are the minister. Typically, there is at least fifteen minutes of silence before someone speaks. Occasionally, the one hour of Meeting may elapse without anyone speaking. When this occurred at a recent PAFM Meeting, a Friend remarked that it happens “about two or three times a year.”

Eric, sitting in the front row, facing me, stands to speak. He has a long grey pony-tail and beard. The small sounds of his clothing moving against the deep silence of the Meeting announce his intent. Similar sounds are heard all around the room suddenly as people relax and subtly readjust themselves to listen. It’s about twenty minutes into the Meeting.

PAFM Meeting for Worship, February 10, 2008

Contemporary Friends practice Meeting for Worship very much in the same style that the first Quakers did at the start of the movement in the 17th century. It is the central practice of all Quaker communities. The other major practice, Meeting for Business, is conducted in a very similar spirit; technically, it is called Meeting for Worship on the Occasion of Business.
What is most remarkable about a Quaker community, in contrast to most faith-based groups in the West, is that it is non-doctrinal. This means that participants refrain from authoritatively defining the content of their beliefs and practices. This is not to say that no individual Quaker describes the content of belief and practice, but anyone that does is understood to be speaking only for him or herself. The participation structure of the Meeting practice mirrors the social structure of Quakerism as a whole, namely that no one individual has any more authority than anyone else. Here are two statements about this concept from Pacific Yearly Meeting’s *Faith & Practice* (2001):

“We worship, live and work together in unity, however, valuing the variety of expressions of truth which each individual brings.” (p. 20)

Epistle from London YM, 1987, to Lima YM,

“The Eternal, the Divine, and God may mean the same or not, depending on the context, the speaker or the reader. The language used in all Quaker writing (including this *Faith and Practice*) varies with the source of material. Friends should temper their interpretations, knowing that any specific phrase may have different connotations to different Friends.” (p. 21)

This raises the question: how is a shared sense of meaning generated in such a non-doctrinal religious community? In other words, how do newcomers learn to be Quakers if Quakers don’t say who Quakers are? The model of a community of practice serves to shed light on this question because it argues for making participation in authentic practice primary over the acquisition of knowledge or belief. In the CoP view, learning is the social process of participation in Quaker communities, and is not marked by acceptance of or indoctrination into any particular belief system; it is enacted solely through participation in the shared practice of Meeting for Worship.

**Quakers as a Community of Practice**

The participation structure of a Quaker Meeting lends itself to framing as a community of practice. According to this theoretical framework, learning is “a social phenomenon constituted in the experienced, lived-in world, through legitimate peripheral participation in ongoing social practice,” (Lave, 1991). Furthermore, the CoP framework sees the acquisition of knowledgeable skill as a byproduct of newcomer’s transformed identities, this transformation having been wrought through participation. Newcomers are “transforming their understanding as they transform their identities.” In the following
fieldnote from Santa Cruz Friends Meeting, we hear two different Quakers drawing direct connections between transformation of identity and participation in shared activity:

I come to Meeting for Worship for the purpose of being transformed. There is that of God in me. There is also that of suffering in me. I have both, and sometimes one stands in the way of the other. I don’t know what it is that breaks me open ~ to fully accept what you have to offer. My suffering, history and personal experience of you get in the way. Know that I am trying. I come to Meeting for Worship to be transformed.

Transformation is not a solitary journey. Seeking transformation means paying attention – to ourselves and what’s coming towards us. It’s imperative that we do it. This comes through practice... We are not alone on this journey.

Santa Cruz Meeting for Worship, February 17, 2008

Quakers can be seen as a prototypical community of practice. Rather than receiving direct-instruction on who Quakers are and what they do, newcomers gain legitimate access to authentic Quaker practice. To be Quaker is not to possess specific knowledge or belief, but to participate in the shared practice of the Meeting. Intent participation describes one mode of learning in communities of practice where peripheral newcomers “listen in” on oldtimers engaged in authentic practice with the intent of eventually participating in the same practice (Rogoff, 2003). We can see this kind of learning very clearly in the Quaker community as newcomers listen to oldtimers give public testimony in Meeting for Worship with the intent to eventually speak themselves, if and when they feel called to do so.

This brings to mind Lave’s (1991) citation of Alcoholics Anonymous as a community of practice where newcomers learn from oldtimers how to speak to the group.

New members of AA begin by attending meetings at which oldtimers give testimony about their drinking past... Newcomers gradually generate a view that matches more closely the AA model, eventually producing skilled testimony in public meetings and gaining validation from others as they demonstrate appropriate understanding. (p.73)

The advice to use plain speech and speak from the heart means that participants don’t often use Quaker jargon in their ministry, instead speaking to the group through personal experience and perspectival descriptions of the world. In terms of frequency, a newcomer may have spoken more times in a year than an oldtimer has in a decade. Equally common: a newcomer doesn’t speak at all in a year while some oldtimers do regularly. Even oldtimers contravene widely-accepted norms for ministry. It is not uncommon for a veteran to speak at length in Meeting, in apparent disregard for the advice to speak succinctly. In the end, it is
evident that no rules or doctrine can ever overrule what is practiced in the sanctified space of the Meeting. In the end this spells the primacy of practice over norms. One side effect of this is that it may be difficult for a newcomer to distinguish an oldtimer from another newcomer, judging solely by behavior in the Meeting.

Discontinuity Introduced by Inward Practice

Still, despite open access to public ministry by oldtimers, one must take into account the fact that a typical Meeting for Worship is composed of approximately eighty-percent silence. During this time, participants are sitting quietly in their seats, mostly with eyes closed, not presenting much at all in the way of outward practice. In other words, the vast majority of Quaker Meeting for Worship is an inward practice: participants sitting in meditative thought, presumably reflecting on what’s been said and many other varieties of internal experience. This presents a challenge for legitimate peripheral participation that depends on oldtimers engaged in visible, emulatable practice. The following fieldnote shares my own inward observation as a newcomer confronted by this silent practice.

I close my eyes and consider what it is I am doing here. Friends often describe the attitude one adopts in Meeting as ‘expectant waiting.’ What is it we are waiting for? What is it we expect to discover? I find my thoughts wandering to other times and situations, homework I have to complete, emails I must reply to... I open my eyes and look at other Friends. Are they wandering off in thought or are they present?...

Once again, I close my eyes and listen to my thoughts. I search for something wise or profound to speak, and several ideas occur to me... It’s helpful advice to myself, but not anything that seems worth breaking the deep silence in a room full of people to say... I decide to sit quietly.

PAFM Meeting for Worship, February 10, 2008

A distinction needs to be made here between the content of reflection and the process of reflection. The former is what gets spoken when a participant stands to share vocal ministry in a Meeting; this is the product of Quaker practice. The latter is the enactment of Quaker practice. Therefore, while there are plenty of opportunities for newcomers to learn what typical Quaker ministry sounds like, there is very little access to the authentic inward practice which generates ministry. Given that Quakerism is non-doctrinal and holds practice to be primary, I would argue that the inward practice of Meeting for Worship is the central activity of a Quaker community, and the one that newcomers need access to in order to become legitimate peripheral participants. How can newcomers gain access to and learn
from an unvoiced practice? Conversely, how can oldtimers give feedback on a newcomer’s silent practice? In short, it is difficult for newcomers to learn from oldtimers how to be Quaker.

This lack of access and explanation has been shown to lead to lack of engagement by newcomers. According to recent fieldwork by Plüss (2007),

Novices who wish to receive explanations of the meaning of institutional conduct need to self-appoint themselves into the role of learners... Friends ‘were very helpful if asked – but I always had to ask.’ ...[N]ewcomers discontinued group involvement because they found members were ignoring them.

According to a survey of 288 American Quakers, thirty percent of the sample recalled that they received no information about Friends when they started participating in the group (Plüss, 2007).

Still, despite the apparent lack of visible access to the inward practice of Quakers, the movement has persisted and reproduced for three and a half centuries. Clearly there are other processes at work. Continued fieldwork in Quaker communities can uncover how opportunities for legitimate peripheral access to inward practice are created.

CONCLUSION

Based on the foregoing analysis and preliminary data gathering, I’m motivated to pursue further participant-observer research into Quaker communities. These groups lend themselves to analysis as communities of practice, yet exhibit unusual characteristics that may be generative in yielding new insights. It’s my hope that future work in this area will contribute to understanding how participation in collaborative communities can lead individuals and groups to be mindful of their own collaborative processes.

REFERENCES


**APPENDIX: SAMPLE FIELDNOTES FROM QUAKER MEETINGS**

Quaker Meeting for Worship, Palo Alto Friends Meeting  
February 10, 2008, 10:30am – 12:00pm  
Field Notes by Daniel Steinbock

Will and I carpool to the Meeting on this Sunday morning and park on the street out front. It is 10:29am, one minute before the scheduled start of the Quaker Meeting for Worship. As we walk up the drive, we pass and greet a few Friends heading into the old Meetinghouse, where the children, youth and teens attend First Day School. We enter the new Meetinghouse along with several other just-arriving Friends and grab our name tags from the rack on the left. The Greeter, a woman in her seventies, stands by the open Meeting room door and smiles as I walk through it.

The seats of the Meeting room are eighty-percent full and I look around for a place to sit. Seeing a stretch of open seats on the right, two rows from the back, I walk around the outside to get to it. My friend, Will, follows. There’s one woman sitting at the end of the row of five seats, and I make a snap decision to sit right next to her, rather than leaving a gap. I recall this being the norm at Santa Cruz Meeting, where I was first introduced to Quakerism. Once seated I look around to confirm my intuition about the social distance norm and actually see quite a number of gaps, some in the act of being created as other arrivals seat themselves. Will sits two seats over, leaving a gap between us.

The Greeter unstops the double door and lets it close quietly. The Meeting has officially begun. I look around the room and see that the vast majority have their eyes closed. I note a couple of professors I know from school. My eyes roam around the perimeter of the
room and note a painting of a leaf in one corner in violet and yellow; it looks like the aura of a leaf. In the other corner is a small, upright piano. On both sides of the room, high windows let in the morning sunlight. On the wall opposite the entryway, there is a large fireplace and mantle. To both sides of the fireplace is a large sliding glass door, letting out into a rock-covered garden.

I close my eyes and consider what it is I am doing here. Friends in this Meeting and the Santa Cruz Meeting often describe the attitude one adopts in Meeting as “expectant waiting”. What is it we are waiting for? What is it we expect to discover? I find my thoughts wandering to other times and situations, homework I have to complete, emails I must reply to, relationships that need repair. When I notice my distraction from the present moment I silently chide myself and try to concentrate on the real situation in which I’m participating. I open my eyes and look at other Friends. Are they wandering off in thought or are they present? Those who have their eyes open stare blankly into space over the assembly’s heads. One man reads from a book. Once again, I close my eyes and listen to my thoughts. I search for something wise or profound to speak, and several ideas occur to me, all related in one way or another to my personal struggles this week. It’s helpful advice for myself, but not anything that seems worth breaking the deep silence in a room full of people to say. I imagine myself standing and speaking in front of all those people and feel a nervous tension in my body. I imagine saying something utterly mundane, comical, or even offensive. There are no rules against doing so, but there would no doubt be repercussions as Friends would come to me after the Meeting to discuss what I’d said. I decide to sit quietly.

Eric, sitting in the front row, facing me, stands to speak. He has a long grey pony-tail and beard. The small sounds of his clothing moving against the deep silence of the Meeting announce his intent. Similar sounds are heard all around the room suddenly as people relax and subtly readjust themselves to listen. It’s about twenty minutes into the Meeting.

Eric says he’s been sitting here thinking about events that were going on almost exactly forty years ago, in 1968. He recounts the pivotal events of that election year: the announcement of RFK’s candidacy, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and subsequent assassination of RFK, the bloody police riots outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, IL. He tells the story of Julian Bond, an African American man who, after delivering an articulate speech at the convention, was unexpectedly proposed as a candidate for Vice-President. At 28 years old, he cited the Constitutional requirement of
being 35, and politely declined. Eric shared that Bond attended a Quaker school in Pennsylvania through high school and that he’d later cited it great influence on his beliefs and practices. Later on, Bond was one of six students of Dr. MLK Jr. in 1961, when the Dr. held a brief lectureship at Fisk University. Eric recounts a story of a chance encounter between the two on campus one day. MLK is disturbed by a nightmare from the night before, and Bond helps the Dr. cope by encouraging him to reconceive it as a dream. According to Eric, this event inspired the “I Have a Dream” speech, MLK is so famous for. He says that, in daily life, in our interactions with others, we sow seeds by communicating the convictions hold. Some fall on hard ground and don’t grow. Some fall in the weeds and grow stunted. Others fall on fertile ground and blossom. As Friends living in the world, we never know where or with whom the seeds of our convictions may grow and flourish.

Eric sits and the room settles back into silence for ten minutes or so.

A woman on the opposite side of the room from Eric stands to speak. She’s the clerk of the Peace & Social Justice committee. She asks, “How do we stop dreaming? How do we put things into action?” She relates how Friends funded a project to help replenish the agricultural soil washed away in Haiti’s hurricanes. “We can make the ground fertile, but how to plant seeds to grow?” She sits.

After a long silence, a woman stands to shares a story about her time at Quaker boarding school in Pennsylvania during the 1960s. She says that her roommate was the first black student admitted to that particular school.

After another long silence, the sound of movement and voices stirs me to open my eyes. Friends are greeting their neighbors on all sides with handshakes and a uniform “good morning.” A man in the front row, George, stands and introduces himself as the representative of Worship committee tasked with facilitating announcements this morning. He invites newcomers, visitors and occasional attenders to stand and introduce themselves to the Meeting; several people do so. For some, this is their first time attending a Meeting. For others, they are members of distant Meetings who are in town temporarily. After these introductions, George invites those with birthdays in the month of February to “re-introduce themselves to the Meeting.” A woman tells us it’s her 54th birthday and relates how she first came to the Quakers. After reading announcements of various upcoming events and workshops, George adjourns the Meeting by asking for two minutes of silence, after which all rise and exit the room to the outdoors where snacks are drinks are served.
I arrive late to this Santa Cruz Meeting and am invited to sit in the fellowship room until 15 minutes into the Meeting, when latecomers will be admitted. I sit down next to a bookshelf filled with pamphlets from Quaker organizations around the country, though concentrated in Pennsylvania. Above the shelf is a painting depicting Native Americans walking into a Quaker Meeting in the 1700s. Below it is a piece of paper that tells the story of how they had come to kill the Quakers, but changed their minds when they saw them sitting quietly, in peace, worshiping “Great Spirit”.

After 15 minutes, I enter the Meeting room with other latecomers and take a seat. The sound of the heater blowing air is rather prominent in the deep silence. After awhile it goes off. It gets cold.

There are whiteboards mounted on one wall. In the corner is a series of giant post-it sheets with questions on them for gathering feedback. Questions like, “How can we improve how the Meeting for Worship is carried out? How can we improve how the Meeting for Business is conducted?” There is a stack of cards and pens next to a box for submitting answers. A sign says these were created for soliciting feedback in advance of the Spring retreat, and created by “the ad hoc visioning and planning committee”.

There are about forty people sitting in silence this morning. After ten minutes of silence, a woman in back stands and speaks.

“Once a month, we have Meeting for Business. I come to Meeting for Worship for the purpose of being transformed. There is that of God in me. There is also that of suffering in me. I have both and sometimes one stands in the way of the other. I don’t know what it is that breaks me open – to fully accept what you have to offer. My suffering, history and personal experiences of you get in the way. Know that I am trying. I come to Meeting for Worship to be transformed.”

The woman sits and five or ten minutes of silence passes before another woman stands to speak. “I am also here for transformation. We must seek it.”

After five or ten more minutes, a very old woman speaks next.
“I’ve been thinking about people going to the nuclear summit (in Livermore), and how to bring them transformation? When we carry that of God in us, we carry the power to transform. Our responsibility is to do so together.”

The heater comes on again and blows warm air into the Meeting room. Alene, sitting in the front row, stands. “Once again, I’d like us to re-imagine the heater as warm Mother Earth breathing into us warmth and energy and life to guide us into the days, weeks and seasons beyond.”

After ten minutes of silence, Clark, sitting next to me, stands to speak: “Transformation is not a solitary journey. Seeking transformation means paying attention – to ourselves and what coming towards us. It’s imperative that we do it. This comes through practice. Death is the final transformation; I want to be prepared for that – of which I know little and understand less. We find presence with ourselves and with others. We are not alone on this journey.”