

The Spiritual Benefits of Picking Up Trash

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It's 10 o'clock in the morning. Sunday School has just drawn to a close. In about half an hour, friends will begin to gather for Meeting for Worship.

"Saleem, go to Abu Nassar. See if he can spare an empty cardboard box", asked my father as he began to pick up the trash that had been thrown from Main Street by passersby's into the front yard of the Meeting House. "The yard will not be presentable if we leave it this way." It is Palm Sunday and soon the Meeting will be full of people.

Out of the Meeting's front gate, I turn right and run down Main Street to Abu Nassar's store. It is only one shop down from my father's pharmacy. I know Abu Nassar well and am certain he will not mind giving me a box; he's done so countless times before, nearly every Sunday. But this time, to my surprise, Abu Nassar closed his store early. Apparently, he had already left to join the Palm Sunday procession. It seemed to me that everyone in town must have been there.

Returning to the Meeting House without a box, the consequences quickly become clear to me. I was destined to another episode of picking up trash by hand and carrying it by the armload to my father's car which was parked all the way down the street. It seemed that the Meeting House's front yard had become a convenient place for merchants and peddler's to discard their trash. Why did I have to pick it up?

Collecting trash before Meeting had become a routine Sunday chore --a weekly ritual of sorts. It felt burdensome. As I grew a little older, I often thought of ways to get out of it. As soon as I was old enough to walk home alone, I used this newly founded freedom as a way to avoid trash duty. Immediately after Sunday School, which at that time was held prior to Meeting for Worship, I would quickly dart away and walk home thereby skipping Meeting and the dreaded chore.

Later I came to realize that by missing Meeting for Worship, I missed out on many other things. I missed the hymns which I so adored and enjoyed singing. I missed Don Hutchinson and Sina Mansour Hutchinson playing the organ so gracefully. How they pumped life into that ancient instrument and created such beautiful music, I still do not know! For truly that organ belonged in a museum perhaps more than it belonged in our Meeting House. But then again, it seemed so right sitting there where it was. It belonged in the Meeting House and offered a great deal of character to a present so deeply rooted in and enriched by the past.



Original pump organ, Ramallah Friends Meeting.

I remember the day the pump organ stopped working. A piece of my soul went with it. The day we replaced it with an electric keyboard was bittersweet. To me it symbolized the beginning of a new era -one that was less pure, less authentic.

When I skipped Meeting for Worship, I also missed Ellen Mansour's beautiful smile that always managed to uplift everyone's spirit. Her kindness reached out far beyond human expectations. I missed my father's frequent messages and my mother's deep sharing of a piece of her soul. It always amazed me as to how she put such spiritual matters into words. And of course, I missed Dr. Mansour's readings from the Bible.

When I skipped Meeting for Worship, I missed coming to know new friends and visiting with old ones. They often came from places I had never heard of before. I found it fascinating; their stories were so interesting and intriguing. I missed Anna Langston's sermon and Peggy Paul's address. I missed seeing my grandmother, my aunt and my great aunt.

Missing Meeting for Worship meant missing the fellowship at the rise of meeting. After some time, I came to realize that I was paying too high of a price just to avoid picking up trash. I gave in. I stopped walking home by myself and stayed to pick up trash, all in order to be a part of the life of the Meeting.



Photographs were regularly taken at the rise of Meeting for Worship throughout the 1960's.

Yet, still a child, I continued to beg my father with the question, "Why do we have to do this?"

His consistent reply: "We don't have to do anything, son. We choose to do what we do. As frustrating as it may seem to you now, we must continue picking up trash. Day after day, quietly and patiently, we will continue the practice of removing that which masks the beauty of this earth. It is an important practice

that keeps us going and working towards something larger than ourselves and more important than our convenience. That is what keeps the dream alive and cultivates the Spirit. One day you will understand the meaning of patience and persistence.”

Tilling a Garden of Faith

Today, as I reflect back on my early years, my memories return with ease. It seems that every stage of my childhood has some form of meaningful connection to this place, this meeting, this community.

I remember being a shepherd in the Christmas play and what it meant to hear the joyous news of the newborn child. Carol, who later became my wife, played Mary that year and my best friend, Ricky, played Joseph.

As a young adult, I taught Sunday School. Together, with Bruce Stanley, I played guitar. Bruce was my teacher at the Friends School and became a good friend. I remember how he sang “Morning Has Broken”.

*Morning has broken like the first morning
Blackbird has spoken like the first bird
Praise for the singing
Praise for the morning
Praise for them springing fresh from the world*

*Sweet the rain's new fall, sunlit from heaven
Like the first dewfall on the first grass
Praise for the sweetness of the wet garden
Sprung in completeness where his feet pass*

*Mine is the sunlight
Mine is the morning
Born of the one light Eden saw play
Praise with elation, praise ev'ry morning
God's recreation of the new day*

As an adult, I stood in the front row of the Meeting House during my father’s funeral service. I listened to the many different religious leaders of the community bid him farewell. All the while, I drew strength from the inner peace that could only be nurtured by the sound of the silence in this very special place.

Today, more than thirty years later, as I reflect on our Meeting, I realize that circumstances beyond our control move some of us on to different places, while others of us persevere where they are.

Friends, wherever you might be, I am with you in spirit. I am grateful for your presence and your perseverance. For those few steadfast faithful who continue the spiritual practice of picking up trash and have even begun to till the garden: you inspire me! Your patience and friendship inspires this Meeting to tend the garden of faith –not knowing the future, yet trusting in the One who holds the future. I thank those who never gave up, especially my mother. I trust we will continue to be inspired with a vision of service towards preparing the ground for a culture of peace and nonviolence.



The Meeting's front yard today. A garden of peace, a garden of faith.

Today, I celebrate all those once dreaded, not quite understood spiritual practices which now take on new meaning through the fellowship of the human spirit.