

# White Supremacy Culture in My Clerking

August 1, 2024 By [Michael Levi](#)



Photo by Jono Erasmus

I recently served as clerk of the board of trustees at a Friends school. It was a turbulent time for the school, and board meetings were often contentious. One of the dynamics that played out in our meetings was differences in perspective and approach between the Quaker members (all of whom were White) and the non-Quaker members (many of whom were Black). During a debriefing session toward the end of my term as clerk, one of the Black board members told me that when I called for a period of silent worship after she spoke during a meeting, she felt that her voice had been silenced and her concern dismissed.

I offer the following account as a personal case study in identifying and wrestling with racial harm in a specific Quaker practice.

If my fellow board member was referring to one particular occasion when she felt silenced, I do not remember the details of that meeting. So instead, I must look at patterns. I have served as clerk for many committees and several institutions. Calling for a period of silent worship during Friends business process is a standard technique in my repertoire. I am not referring to worship at the beginning or end of a meeting, nor of worship between agenda items, but rather of silent worship that pauses the flow of vocal ministry and discernment.

The task of a clerk is to provide space for the Spirit to gather the assembled people into unity. Clerking is a mix of seeking Divine will (the “faith” part) and hands-on group facilitation (the “practice” part.) My Quaker faith is foundational; my practice must be open to change when it no longer best serves that faith.

There are many circumstances in which I have found the technique of calling for a period of silent worship to be helpful. Among those are when I believe a Friend’s message merits further reflection before the conversation moves on, when the discussion has veered off topic and I need to bring folks back to the original issue, and when a meeting has devolved to the point where participants are no longer listening to one another. I have also called for silence when I didn’t know what to do next and needed a little time to pull myself together. Typically, though not always, I will explain the motivation for my interruption in words such as “Friends, let us take a few minutes to recenter on Spirit and the agenda item before us.”

When my fellow board member told me how she felt my intervention had silenced her, I was surprised. My immediate reaction was “That was not my intent; that was the opposite of my intent!” This was soon followed by the thought, *what we need here is better education on Friends business process*. I have since used this anecdote as an example of how misunderstandings can damage relationships and how fraught such damage can be. As time has passed, though, I realize that I need to unpack more than just a misunderstanding.

At the most fundamental level, a woman of Color told me directly that I had caused her harm. I am a White man. I believe that my obligation, in response, is to listen, to appreciate the gift of truth I have been given, to do my best to hear, and to do my best to process what I’ve understood.

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Drawing on teachings from author Tema Okun, whose website is [Whitesupremacyculture.info](http://Whitesupremacyculture.info), and resources from [Dismantling Racism Works](http://DismantlingRacismWorks.com), I understand White supremacy as the ideology that people identified as White, and their thoughts and actions, are inherently better than people identified as non-White, and their thoughts and actions. I understand White supremacy culture as the embedding of this ideology throughout institutions in the United States, including the education, criminal justice, and healthcare systems and the media, where the underlying message, both overtly and covertly, is: “whiteness holds value, whiteness is value.”

Even with a superficial look, I see at least two problems with my initial response of “Oh my, that was not what I meant to do—what a terrible misunderstanding.” The first is that by casting the event in these terms, I have placed the onus on the recipient of the harm. *She* misunderstood; thus, it was *her* responsibility. The learning that needs to take place is on *her* side. I suspect this linguistic shift of agency first reflected and then reinforced my reluctance to examine my role as doer of harm.

The other problem is that my intent was, at best, only marginally relevant. If the impact of my clerking is to disempower participants, then I either need to fix the tools I am using to accomplish certain goals or I need to find a different set of tools. Once I have been informed of harm, intent is no longer an excuse.

My inclination is to first look at fixing the tool. Friends business process tends to be opaque to newcomers, regardless of their background. Good training during orientation, updated with concrete examples and repeated regularly for all board members, is a reasonable place to start.

In addition, when calling for a period of silent worship during an agenda item, I can more consistently explain my purpose and reinforce my words with appropriate follow-up. A Friend pointed out to me that an introductory statement such as “Friends, let us consider the message we have just received” can be indistinguishable in its effect from “Let’s pretend to take that last comment seriously, and then move on,” unless the clerk ties the message back into the conversation when active discernment resumes. The tool can be better explained and deployed. Other tools may be found or developed that serve the same purpose without carrying the same baggage.

Addressing the tool in isolation, though, leaves White supremacy culture unruffled. Tema Okun writes:

Because white supremacy culture is the water we swim in, we inevitably internalize the messages about what this culture believes, values, and considers

normal. We absorb these messages as individuals and as a collective. As a result, white supremacy culture shapes how we think and act, how we make decisions and behave.

Surely my personal biases influence my clerking in general, and specifically my use of periods of silent worship.

When I call for silence during a meeting, do I have a pattern of lifting up, or shutting down, certain people or demographic groups? Is it violations of White cultural norms that lead me to believe a meeting has “gone off track”? When participants express themselves passionately, does that necessarily mean they are not listening to others? Is there a parallel here to stereotypes such as Black boys being seen as too loud in public spaces or Black women being perceived as always angry? Is there a more expansive way for me to understand “listening”?



Photo by pressmaster

My reflections began with the assumption that my intentions were pure, thus it was the tool and not the goals that needed to be fixed. When is that not the case?

The Quaker Coalition for Uprooting Racism (QCUR) [statement](#) on “Racial Wounding and Racial Justice in Quaker Communities” has been very helpful in giving me some direction. As I read down the column naming patterns of racial harm, I find many behaviors that feel familiar. The ones that strike me as particularly compelling, in this context, are the following:

- Shutting down dissent
- Thinking that everyone has the same amount of power within Quakerism rather than acknowledging dynamics that impact how much people feel empowered to speak their truth and/or be witnessed in their truth
- Insisting on a false sense of urgency to avoid recognizing harm

I am aware that conflict can make me anxious. Though I am quite comfortable with dispassionate disagreement, I am often unnerved by disagreement that is

accompanied by strong emotion. This discomfort comes, at least in part, from being raised in a middle-class, White family where decorum was highly valued. I'm pretty sure that I have called for periods of silent worship simply to calm the room down to a level that no longer feels threatening to me. And I recognize that what feels threatening to me is deeply conditioned by White supremacy culture.

I am also reluctant to admit that I, personally, have power. But in the boardroom where I was called out, I had all the explicit and implicit authority of being a White Quaker man with the added weight of the clerk's office. Though this article is focused on antiracist awareness, I am simultaneously the beneficiary of other areas of privilege that amplify my power, including class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and organizational position. This gives me an obligation to pay particular care to how my words and actions impact marginalized people. Starting with a close look at just one tool has taken me far deeper than I anticipated; there are many tools left at which to look.

Finally, I know that I can have trouble with what the QCUR statement calls "right relationship to time." One of the duties of a clerk is to keep discernment reasonably focused so that it finishes within some reasonably allotted time span. I have often felt torn between competing responsibilities, one of which may be to follow the direction of a Friend whose message feels deeply Spirit-led but is not likely to lead to a rapid conclusion of the business item at hand. This experience is routine. I have a lot of practice trying to discern, on the spot, where the Spirit is leading a group.

The message "you hurt me," however, is qualitatively different from "maybe we are looking at this issue in the wrong way." Harm stands in a class by itself. Where racial harm is concerned, I do not have a lot of practice trying to discern, on the spot, where the Spirit is leading. My escape, at least sometimes, has been to focus on the "unwanted" amount of time a "detour" would take. I suspect that I have called for periods of silent worship with the internal justification that business would resume more rapidly if we took a little break than it would if we attended to the pain that had been expressed.

The same holds true for unspoken messages of hurt, but even more so. I am familiar with the sinking feeling in my stomach when I know something has just gone wrong but I'm not sure exactly what it is, or I'm afraid that acknowledging a microaggression will somehow cause the room to explode, or I'm just so stunned that I can't think straight. It is the nausea I feel when I sense I'm about to step into a swamp of anguish on the one side, defensiveness on the other, and anger all around. Here, especially, I suspect that I have called for periods of silent worship so that business could resume "calmly, timely, and on track" afterward.

**Where is the Spirit in all this? I have focused on the nitty-gritty, the practice component of serving as clerk. But it is my faith that has brought me thus far. I rarely hear the Spirit giving me step-by-step instructions. What I mainly hear is: “Are you being honest? Are you being kind? Are you being loving? Are you being loving? Are you being loving?”**

Where my reflections have led me so far is that the practice of calling for a period of silent worship during discernment is not inherently an expression of White Supremacy culture, but that my use of it has included times when the practice supported White Supremacy culture.

What I'd really like, at this point, is a comprehensive antiracist primer with detailed instructions for all scenarios. I want specifics! What do I do next Wednesday afternoon if . . . ?

I'm pretty sure I won't get that anytime soon. And I am coming to accept that I'm looking for the wrong thing. What I want is a technical fix. But what I hear from People of Color is that the society in which I operate needs systemic social, economic, political, and cultural transformation. Fundamental change won't come from technical fixes. Among many other things, transformation will come from profound changes in people like me. When I get frustrated that many of the interventions toward racial justice suggested by the QCUR statement are too broad to be operational, I need to remind myself that is a feature and not a bug. Sweating the details, as I am trying to do in this piece, seems important, but it may be the easy part. The hard part will be to wrestle with my deep conditioning, to become aware of and then begin to disassemble the ingrained White supremacy ideology that shapes how I think, make decisions, and behave. The hardest part, I suspect, will be to accept that I not only observe and sometimes acquiesce to White supremacy culture, but I also create and enforce it. And then to stop doing that.

Beyond personally wrestling with my own indoctrination, I am beginning to think that there are two further interventions that could help people like me clerk so that all participants feel respected, heard, and that they belong.

The first recognizes that clerks are not always able to keep careful track of what they are doing while they are doing it. White clerks also may not be able to detect when and how they are acting in a way that enforces White supremacy culture. What clerks like me need is to have an accountability component added to the charge of their support committee. The committee would then routinely review the flow of

meetings with the clerk, paying special attention to any signs of White supremacy culture or other forms of privilege that the clerk or any member of the group may have expressed. Their purpose would be to hold the clerk responsible in a firm and loving manner, and help the clerk grapple with issues.

The second intervention would be to explicitly broaden the circle of clerks. Lone individuals sitting on the facing bench need not carry the load by themselves. Becoming an antiracist faith community involves all community members. Likewise, developing an antiracist approach to business practices will involve everyone who participates in the process (always keeping in mind those who may be affected by a decision but are not represented in the decision making). This will, I believe, require normalizing “clerk-like” conduct from Friends on the benches, both in bringing occurrences of harm to general awareness and helping to process that awareness. This could be one step toward Friends building a culture in which discriminatory privilege can, and will, be brought to a group’s consciousness by anyone at any time, and be received as a loving gift of faith and trust that needs to be unpacked. The presiding clerk, while still charged with facilitating the meeting, can share some of that responsibility with the membership, and pay more attention to being the listener, the weaver of the threads of ministry, and the identifier of unity.

Where is the Spirit in all this? I have focused on the nitty-gritty, the practice component of serving as clerk. But it is my faith that has brought me thus far. I rarely hear the Spirit giving me step-by-step instructions. What I mainly hear is: “Are you being honest? Are you being kind? Are you being loving? Are you being loving? Are you being loving?” Then we play a game of hot and cold: “Warmer. Warmer. Oooh, colder, colder, freezing!” What I am trying to do right now is answer affirmatively: “Yes, I am doing the best I know how to be honest and loving.” And what I’m hearing in return is: “Okay, getting a little warmer.”

I am practicing moving forward on faith alone. I am practicing letting go of perfectionism. The Spirit has prodded me to this point. I expect the Spirit will continue to prod me. I believe my fellow board member brought me a message from the Spirit. I hope my sharing these reflections can help illuminate the way toward becoming a fully faithful community. From QCUR come these words: “Be willing to be changed. Understand that transformation is the Quaker tradition. Our ancestors were led by the Spirit, not fear and certainly not fear of change.”

Many Friends shared their time and wisdom to clarify and expand my thinking and helped me push through the guilt and shame that accompanied writing this piece. I would particularly like to thank Mary Ellsberg, Ruth Flower, Daquanna Harrison, and Margaret Vitullo.

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