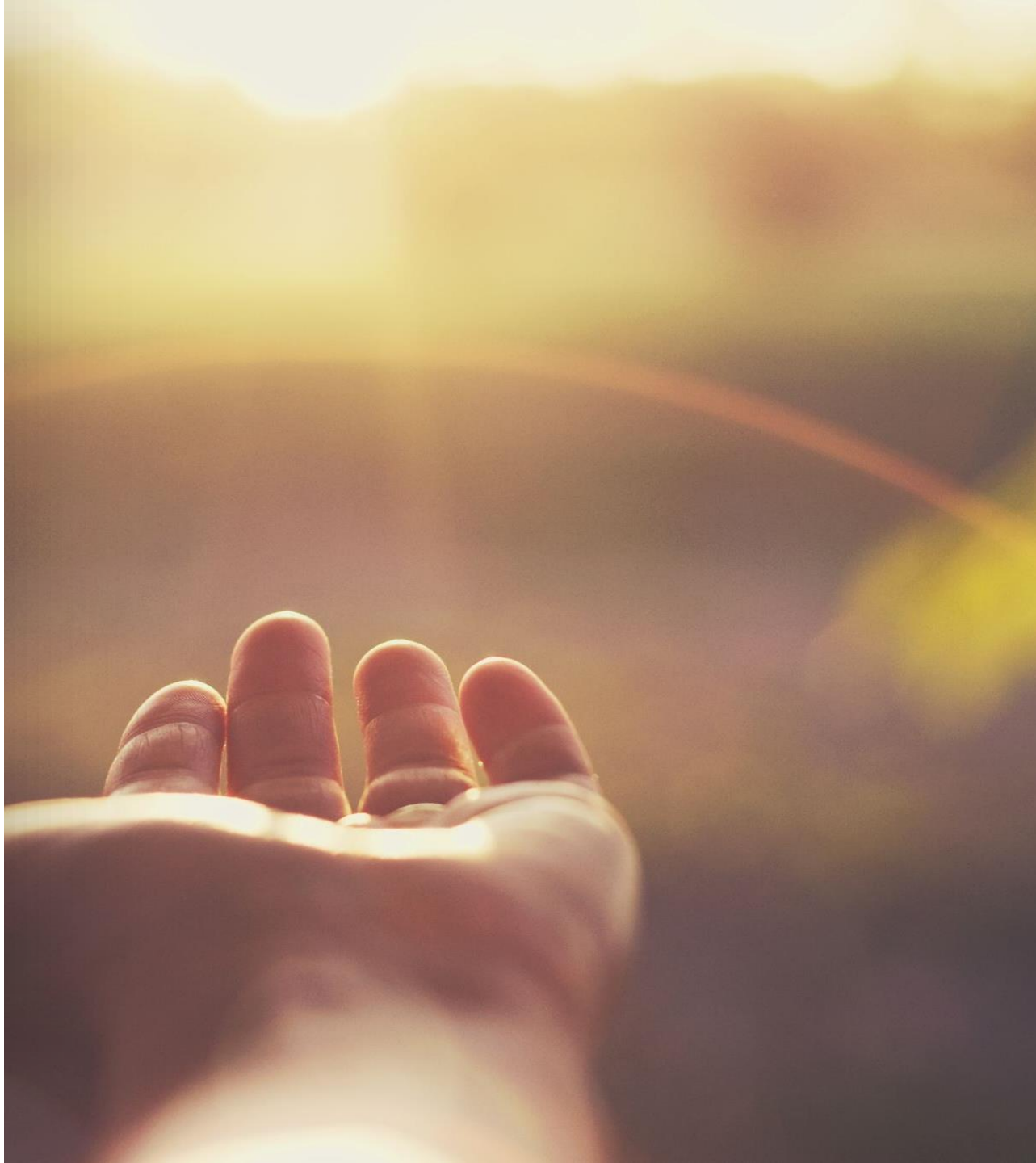
Listening in Tongues

~ Michael Austin Shell

- As my spiritual life has matured and deepened over the decades, I have come to understand that no religious language, whether in scripture, in doctrine, in written or spoken ministry, or in personal testimony, describes the ultimate Reality in any objective way. Rather, at its best such language can only describe the human experience of interaction with that Reality.



~ Tessa Carman

- We understand God through symbols and images that are never exact nor sufficient: an infinite God cannot be fully defined by our own finite intellects…. Names through which we can know God are still just names, insufficient and imperfect as those who use them. But language nevertheless becomes the “clothing” by which we identify and comprehend truths about God.

~ Mary Linda McKinney 1/5

Most of us know about the Pentecostal spiritual practice of “speaking in tongues” which is mentioned in the Bible as being one of the Gifts of the Spirit. In 1st Corinthians 14, it is described as a way of “speaking mysteries” with God.

Listening in tongues is a Quaker flip of the original idea. Rather than each person speaking in words or sounds that others can’t understand, we each speak in the words, concepts, and metaphors that hold the most truth for us and it is on the listener to do the work of hearing the spirit that is behind the words.

~Mary Linda 2/5

There are fewer birthright Friends today than ever before. Many of us come to the Religious Society of Friends from other faith traditions and some of us arrive as refugees carrying a lot of baggage. When folks have been wounded by words or concepts in other churches, they bring a sensitivity to hearing those things. Because we're a loving, kind people, we don't want folks to feel pain or discomfort; so, sometimes we avoid the language or ideas that cause it.

~ Mary Linda 3/5

In some communities, this means that individuals don’t feel they can talk about their experiences of the Divine using the language and concepts that are meaningful and familiar to them. They don’t feel they can show up as their authentic selves. This hurts individuals and it also hurts communities. When we let avoidance of discomfort dictate how we are together, we close ourselves off from Spirit manifesting in new and unexpected ways.

~ Mary Linda 4/5

An example of my baggage was the word “Lord”. I was raised in an Evangelical Christian church in which God was decidedly masculine and gender roles and hierarchy were strictly enforced. The word “Lord” represented ways in which I and so many women, Queer folks, and men have been harmed. Whenever I would hear “Lord” my impulse was to stop listening to the speaker.

~ Mary Linda 5/5

Thankfully, Listening in Tongues is woven through the culture of my home Friends meeting. Modeled for me was compassion about discomfort but also courage and integrity to face and accept it. Rather than let discomfort dictate what others were and were not allowed to say, it was modeled that I could hear the word “Lord” and go beyond my discomfort. The speaker obviously understood something different about the word than I did. Our emotional vocabularies were different. I was taught to listen for the speaker’s meaning, which did not have the hurtful association of my meaning. Over time, the word has become less uncomfortable for me. It’ll probably never be a word I use for God but no longer do I close myself off when someone uses it.

Listening
in
Tongues

Listen in tongues to this message from a Christocentric Friend:

I believe in the existence of three divine persons: God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

God is Creator, Jesus is God Incarnate, and the Holy Spirit is God's Presence in the world.

Were you able to translate?

Does this Friend's message make any sense in your own spirituality? Did you have to let the message "blow through" you without being able to integrate it into your own understanding? Or were you perhaps able to translate part of it into your own spiritual language while part of it was untranslatable?

Advices from Friends World Committee for Consultation/ Americas

Listening in Tongues requires the following:

- We are patient. We tolerate some unknowingness.
- We release a sense of being in control.
- We try listening beneath the words. We open ourselves to all of the non-verbal channels of communication.
- We get as far as we can with listening for meaning and rest in that.
- Extend the time of Listening in Tongues and continue to hold questions.
- Invite the Light/God into those lingering questions.
- If you find you're upset by something you hear, practice self-care.

FWCC Queries for Listening in Tongues

- What helps me do my best listening?
- How does Listening in Tongues with each other help us to listen for God?
- What are the gifts of being in spiritual community with people who speak another language?
- How can we hold open a space for what we don’t know?
- When have you ever been surprised by someone doing a routine task a different way from the way you do it?
- What inward changes might happen because I learned to Listen in Tongues?
- How can “listening in tongues” help Friends with outreach?