

Silence after the storm

By **Pia de Jong** - December 27, 2016

Illustration by Eliane Gerrits

Almost every day I walk with my dog by the old stone building with a white wooden porch that is next to the woods around our house. The first Europeans who settled in Princeton in the late 17th century were families who fled from England. They built a school, a cemetery, and this meeting house. Every Sunday at 9 and 11 a.m., the Friends, as the Quakers call each other, still gather in this old structure.

During my walks, I had sometimes looked inside. Narrow wooden benches, a fireplace, hand-hewn planks on the floor. Nearby, a pile of blankets. It was a cross between a chapel and a living room. No frills. No carpet on the floor, no paintings on the wall. I always wondered what people hoped to find here.

So on a recent Sunday I walk inside for the first time. A friendly woman with her hair in a bun welcomes me. “We meet here to experience the presence of God,” she says. “He is inside us. Sometimes it happens, and we are moved to speak, and sometimes it does not.” Quakers have no pastors or priests.

A courtly gentleman wearing a knitted hat joins us. “Whatever happens here,” he says, “you always feel better afterwards. I have not come here for nothing for more than 50 years.”

Then we sit down, a group of maybe 25 people, mostly older. Outside, I see the wind bending the branches of the

trees. Bright red leaves blow against the windows. Inside, though, a fire crackles in the fireplace. The colors in this room, in the low November light, are warm browns and greens.

Suddenly I feel an intense vibration on my wrist. My pedometer instructs me to walk more. Sitting still is not my strength. I do not always believe in God, but if he exists, this seems like a lovely place to settle down.

It is so different here than in the Catholic Church where I was as a child. There was plenty to do. Murals, crosses, psalms, the heady scent of incense. Bread was distributed, we drank wine from silver cups. Everyone moved — kneeling, standing, walking forward and back. People came in their Sunday clothes. I remember how I hid my face in my mother's fur coat during the sermon to inhale its scents.

Here, it is the opposite: there is just stillness. People come as they are. Gray hair is acceptable. Wrinkles are not buried under a layer of makeup, much less washed away. No high heels, just practical footwear.

I'm not sure if I am expected to feel the spirit of God, so I'm relieved that no one stands up and says something. The silence is beneficial after all the clamor surrounding the elections, all the talking heads, the obsessive talks, the permanent bombardment of news flashes. The president-elect seems like a fairy tale figure. He lives very far away, in his golden palace, with its lackeys and vassals.

Time matters here. We sit silently for a full hour. I feel the cramps in my back, inhale the sweet aromas of dark

resin. My senses are alive. At my feet I see a spider.

Perhaps this is what people mean by God. A sense of continuity that you can call eternity. The cold wind that every fall again climbs the trees and shakes loose the last leaves. In the spring, new people will be born again and will, inevitably, look for meaning. And always, always love again.

The old man was right. As I close the door behind me and walk through the chilly autumn wind, I feel better. Though I'm not sure why.

Pia de Jong

Pia de Jong is a Dutch writer who lives in Princeton. Her bestselling memoir, "Charlotte," was published in January in Amsterdam. She can be contacted at piadejong.com.