

Making Difficult Decisions

BY STUART R. SPRAGUE

Not every medical “advance” deserves our unquestioning acceptance. Decisions about whether and how to employ new technologies are deeply personal, yet they raise questions about our common nature as creatures of God. We must draw upon our religious values, and clearness committees can help us do this in a positive and helpful way.

All new technologies, from the capturing of fire to the harnessing of nuclear fusion, have created difficult moral decisions about their development and use. Recent medical technologies are no exception to this rule. And today when scientists give us the option of changing the human body at the cellular level through cloning, the moral stakes seem higher and the way forward is more cloudy and uncertain.

In decisions about whether and how to employ these medical technologies, the issues we face may be deeply personal, yet they also raise questions about our common nature as human beings and creatures of God. Therefore, we must draw upon our religious values. These values arise within and are nurtured by a religious community, so it would seem natural to turn to that community for help in resolving difficult medical decisions. Nevertheless, in my clinical experience, most people do not seek advice from members of their religious communities, especially in a formal way. There is, however, a wonderful precedent for such a practice in the Quaker tradition.

CLEARNESS COMMITTEES

From the earliest days of their movement, Quakers have called special committees together to perform needed services in the community. One

committee might discuss whether a marriage should be performed in the Meeting (the local assembly that is similar to a congregation), while another might ascertain if an individual should be accepted for membership.¹ Committees made their recommendations to the Meeting, where a vote was taken on each request. While these groups did not make the final decision, they did exert significant influence.²

Sometimes they were called “clearness committees” because their task was to determine whether the primary decision-makers—the engaged couple, or prospective member—had reached “clearness” on the matter under consideration. In Quaker theology each person is believed to have the inner light, a source of divine guidance in making important decisions. Yet one can be more or less successful in discerning the direction that the inner light suggests, because a variety of influences, internal and external, can interfere with one’s ability to see the proper course of action. The committee’s role was to assist the person in discerning the proper direction at a particular life juncture—for example, when entering a marriage or joining a Quaker community.

In one stream of Quaker practice, individuals could call a clearness committee to assist in making other decisions—about whether to pursue a certain ministry, or what to do in a morally confusing situation. Or they might go to an elder, a respected member of the community, for clearness.

Though clearness committees’ role in the process of moral discernment has changed over time and varied somewhat from one community to another, they continue to be a vital part of Quaker life. For example, the practice of calling clearness committees was revived in the 1960s, though in a somewhat different form, by young Quakers seeking guidance about conscientious objection to the Vietnam War and participation in the peace movement. In this case the committees dealt with more personal concerns about a secular matter, rather than with issues to be addressed and resolved by the community in public meetings.³

More recently, Penelope Yungblut has described to me how a clearness committee helped her husband, John, make a difficult medical decision. In 1994, his surgeons gave John only five days to decide whether to have a radical operation—the amputation of his hip and what remained of his leg—to remove the cancer which had recurred. He knew the surgery would be a disabling procedure, but the alternative was death from the cancer in a short time. To assist him in making the decision, he called together a clearness committee composed of friends. As a result of this meeting, he decided to have the surgery. John lived about a year after the procedure and, though he was disabled, he felt he had made the right decision.⁴

When believers today face decisions about whether to use medical technologies like in vitro fertilization, reproductive cloning, or stem cell

therapy, and when they consider using extraordinary life-extending measures for loved ones with chronic illnesses, they find themselves in morally puzzling situations just as John Yungblut did. Too often, unfortunately, their congregations do not offer resources for communal discernment analogous to the clearness committees for Quakers.

HOW AND WHY THEY WORK

Could other religious communities use clearness committees, or adapt them within their faith traditions, to help their members make difficult medical decisions? To answer this question, we need to examine how these committees function and the theological foundation for them.

In Quaker history—and according to a recent manual for clearness—there are two distinct types of clearness committees. The first type of committee is asked to form a judgment about whether clearness has been evidenced during the meeting by the person who requested the committee, and to determine what the person's next step should be. The best examples of this type are the clearness committees called to determine whether two individuals are ready for marriage, or whether a person should be recommended to the Meeting for membership. A second type of committee is not asked to make a judgment, but only to serve the person as a resource for a decision he or she must make. The person's decision may be made during the meeting, or it may come with time after further reflection.⁵

John Yungblut's clearness committee followed the latter model, and since I think it is the most appropriate type for helping individuals to make difficult medical decisions,

I will describe its process and comment briefly on its theological grounding here.

Since the goal is to enable the requesting party to discern the inner light, committee members must be practiced in asking helpful questions. Members should not impose their own answers to these questions or give advice to the person, either directly or

indirectly. People who tend to dominate group discussions or cannot withhold their personal conclusions are not good choices for the committee.

One member should be a skilled facilitator. Since confidentiality is essential, all committee members must be trustworthy in exercising that responsibility.

What exactly is this inner light and why should the person submit to its

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authority? I realize that an entire theological treatise would be needed to address our concerns about the existence of such a light; its grounding in God; how it gives specific direction to a person; and how it interacts with our emotions, rational thoughts, and desires. Religious history, unfortunately, offers many examples of people justifying their horrific actions by appealing to some sort of "inner light." On the other hand, Christians within the free-church tradition (like me) may resonate with how this notion can be adapted to a theology of the Holy Spirit, soul competency, and the priesthood of believers.

Keep in mind that a person does not first *learn* or *develop* the rudiments of moral thinking—the general moral rules or norms, the virtues and vices, the identification of good people whom we can emulate, and the wealth of stories gathered through experience or reading that may be studied with profit—by calling together a clearness committee. Indeed, this process assumes that the person has already developed morally within a faithful community that has been shaped by the reading of Scripture; now the person is seeking, with the assistance of some respected advisors in that community, to *clarify* how these norms, virtues, exemplars, cases, and so on, can guide her or him in the current situation.

The process of decision making in a clearness committee might be described as quite close to the ground: the decision-maker looks intensively at a specific case with the help of trusted friends. While they are surely guided by general moral norms, virtues and vices, exemplars, and stories, the person's decision cannot be derived from these in a simple and mechanical way. The ethicist James Childress, who happens to come from the Quaker tradition, says that in using moral norms we need to avoid two opposite dangers: (1) being inflexibly tied to absolute principles and (2) deciding particular cases with no respect for general norms or boundaries. The middle way, he suggests, requires testing and applying general standards in a variety of contexts and scenarios. Sometimes a norm must be balanced against another norm or further specified according to the details of the case.⁶ (A similar warning could be given for character traits, exemplars, stories, and the other guides for moral decision-making.)

For example, we may agree that we should "do no harm," but how does an infertile couple balance this norm against the opportunity to achieve a significant good, such as starting a family with a genetically related child through in vitro fertilization? The clearness committee might help the couple think more specifically about the nature of the harm involved in creating "extra" embryos, or how this harm relates to the good of family that they desire. Their friends on the committee can also help them identify and overcome any personal biases or prejudices that would distort their understanding of the moral norms and their reflection on the particular case.

The purpose of the committee is to ensure that the process of decision making is not totally subjective and to suggest normative boundaries to complement the purely personal perspectives of the subject of the clearness committee meeting. In the end, though, the decision and the rationale which supports it are in the hands of the decider, led by the inner light.

GETTING STARTED

The clearness committee tradition is enjoying a revival, and not just among the Quakers.⁷ If your congregation is thinking of forming a committee, two ingredients are essential: commitment and competence. Several church members, clergy or laity, must commit themselves to the education and discipline necessary to function in this role. A competent leader should be enlisted to recruit and train committee members and to conduct the committee's work. Before they are called together for clearness, members should establish the boundaries of appropriate practice, learn how to ask questions in a helpful way, and commit themselves to confidentiality and respect for one another and the decision-maker. Feedback and assessment of the group's work will enable the committee to grow in competence over time.

A dedicated and well-trained clearness committee can do much to assist members with difficult moral decisions. Cloning, genetic technologies, and life-extending therapies that are either currently available or on the medical horizon will require that we make hard choices. After hearing the complicated technical details from their physicians, many members will welcome the opportunity to sort through the moral questions with the help of trusted friends.

Not every medical "advance" deserves our unquestioning acceptance. Yet when powerful economic and political forces urge us to make use of these technologies, resisting them can be difficult. Our religious

values should help us to decide whether to embrace a particular medical device or intervention. In some quarters religion has gained, I believe, an undeserved reputation of seeing moral questions in absolute terms and being generally against the progress of science. The issues are more subtle, however, and the questions are more complex. Clearness committees allow faith communities to exercise their values in a positive and helpful way.

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NOTES

1 Margaret Hope Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism: The Story of Quaker Women in America* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1986), 43.

2 Patricia Loring, *Spiritual Discernment: The Context and Goal of Clearness Committees*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 305 (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1992), 20.

3 *Ibid.*, 20-21.

4 Penelope Yungblut told me this story in personal correspondence.

5 Peter Woodrow, *Clearness: Processes for Supporting Individuals and Groups in Decision-Making* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1984), 5

6 James F. Childress, "Moral Norms in Practical Ethical Reflection," in Lisa S. Cahill and James Childress, eds., *Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1996), 196-217.

7 Recently I entered "clearness committee" in an internet search engine and was rewarded with 26,900 hits! Local congregations like First Presbyterian Church of Norfolk, VA, and St. James Anglican Church in Vancouver, BC, sponsor clearness committees. The Episcopal Church's national website features an article on clearness committees, and the American Psychoanalytic Association uses them in enrichment retreats. Colleges like Lane Community College, Eugene, OR, and University of North Carolina-Ashville have clearness committees for faculty to consult regarding issues in teaching. For an elegant description of clearness committees see Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 152-156.



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