

# Kenning – A Mystical Experience Available Even To Skeptics

By Richard Lee

Like peripheral vision, our other senses can also be extended beyond the workday, mainstream range, although skills and techniques for doing this deliberately have nearly been extinguished. The nearly-lost art/discipline of **kenning** involves working at the outer range of what one can know or recognize or understand – perceiving just at the point before something moves “beyond my ken.” It derives from the Middle English *kennen*, (“to make known”) and Old Norse *kenna* (“to perceive.”) Both are akin to the Old English *can* (“to know.”) When used as a spiritual practice, **kenning** means to train one’s senses to unite with the Spirit of God to stretch further than ordinarily possible to see, smell, touch, hear, taste, feel the Light. It extends our availability to Spirit and allows us to receive Guidance more subtle and varied than verbal, rational Messages limited to words as a medium. And reciprocally, this extended and mutual availability gives us new access to calling on Spirit’s Power.

## History

The Celts turned the word into “keening,” which is a kind of improvised vocal lament. Descriptions of keened poems and songs date from the sixteenth century in Ireland and Gaelic Scotland. The chanters of these mourning songs sometimes were accompanied by rocking, kneeling or clapping listeners. Keening singers and their choruses experienced altered states during which their perceptions took on aspects that point to modern meanings of the word: they became especially “keen” – sharp, having a fine edge or point (i.e., keen eyesight) ... possessing a quick and ardent responsiveness (i.e., a keen swimmer) ... or evidencing intellectual alertness (i.e., a keen student) – Miriam-webster.com. [Similar changes are described by kundalini yoga adepts, who report that their discipline “directly affects ones consciousness, develops intuition, increases self knowledge, and unleashes the unlimited creative potential that exists within every human being.” -- Wahesmarawanda, [The Hidden Power in Humans](#)]

Both **kenning** and keening are ancient doorways into spiritual knowing. Suppressed by the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland (synods explicitly opposed the practice in 1631, 1748 and 1800), the practice declined from public view. However, like many of the old practices, it was revered and nurtured by those who retreated to the forests and rural areas, where they could live in ways not in synch with mainstream culture. Among the deepest hidden is the Forest of Dean in England, which has recently been made famous by J.K. Rowling, who set her popular Harry Potter books among the ancient sites with their oral traditions, mysteries and non-rational phenomena. The Forest of Dean has always been a place where folks sought refuge if they did not fit into the norms of society. These people often had a different religion, or they had Spiritual gifts, or they opposed the monarch, or they kept alive the old traditions. It is not by chance that Rowling, who lived in the Forest, chose to utilize stories and approaches which still linger on in the memory of the Forest folk, to be part of her work.

My own [Quaker?] family has its roots in this same Forest of Dean, and it is my own belief – shared by them – that early Quakers including George Fox were “kenners” and inherited/understood the ancient, fast-becoming-discounted **kenning** techniques. At a minimum, it can be documented that Fox was born in a region where **kenning** was quite common into a family of weavers, a trade that was well known to be the keepers of the **kenning** tradition. Later on, George Fox went into the Forest regions while his preaching was just beginning (Fenny Drayton was just north of the Forest of Dean). He knew that the traditionally nonconformist forest folk in the region, (those opposed to both Catholicism and the Church of England), would have an openness to hearing his message. And indeed, the Foresters judged Fox as they did each other -- by his manifest gifts, many of which were extra-sensory and supra-rational. [George Fox’s Book of Miracles](#), as detailed by Henry Cadbury, has descriptions and stories of these miraculous gifts. Fox’s Journal also has stories involving some of these unusual gifts, and the parts of his Journal that were edited out in later editions detail still more of these gifts. Although none of these sources (the Journal deletions, the extant Journal and the Book of Miracles) explicitly mentions **kenning**, taken together, they present a George Fox more congruent with forest lore (and with the fictionalized character in Jan de Hartog’s [The Peaceable Kingdom](#)) than he is with the movement patriarch most Friends find familiar.

Many people know that indigenous cultures are piecing together and recapturing fragments of the Shamanic traditions and practices of their ancestors through the veil of censorship of generations of oppressive colonialists. In somewhat the same way, I consider my study of **kenning** to be the recovery of what is possibly an indigenous

early Quaker practice. My grandmother lived in the Forest her whole life and my ancestry in the region goes back thousands of years. My grandmother was a healer and a Kenner. She taught me what she knew and she also initiated me into our family tradition of **kenning** and healing. Tapping the close-held forest traditions and practices that were taught to me as the descendent of a hereditary Guardian of the Forest of Dean allows me to use those lenses to look at the ancient and honorable spiritual tool of **kenning** (as well as George Fox's extra-rational gifts which are closely related if not identical) and develop teaching methods to reconstruct it and introduce it to interested modern-day Quakers.

#### How I teach **kenning**

Although everything of which the human consciousness is aware can be positively impacted by **kenning** techniques, I find it helpful to begin with a single one of the senses – sound – and focus on how it can bring direct experiences of the Light that go beyond words. Sound may be the most accessible of the senses to ken with, as evidenced by the fact that **kenning** survived longest in the form of poetry. As my teachers showed me, **kenning** is not an art to be learned academically; accordingly my method is experiential punctuated by explanations as questions arise.

Guided by my (kenned) sense of the needs, openness and readiness of the learners, I select from a repertoire of experiential exercises and experiments to allow participants to taste, explore and savour the new dimensions available to and through their sense of sound at a pace and sequence determined by them. This makes it hard to predict reliably how days will be structured. The weeklong outline that follows, therefore, is illustrative and will undoubtedly need to be varied. See the "Repertoire of Activities" that follows for detail about what will be expanded on in each segment. And – again – let me emphasize that what I am laying out for you is the grid/map/structure upon which Spirit and Teacher dance, selecting the appropriate next step at each juncture.

#### A Typical Week-long Teaching

##### **Day 1: Setting the Groundwork**

Centering/Opening

Introductions

Explanation: Though most days begin experientially, this first day requires some setting of context and understanding of what we'll be doing. We'll begin with a brief discussion of the concepts in this Introduction – so that people can have a shared framework into which to drop the week's experiential, mystical learnings.

Expanding the Senses in Worship: Meeting for Worship with Attention to Sound

Twilight Meeting

##### **Day 2: Travelling on Soundwaves**

Centering/Opening

Experience: Travelling on a tone, Tuning forks and bells

Explanation: Circle for sharing, Text exploration

Expanding the Senses in Worship: Meeting for Worship with Attention to Sound

Twilight Meeting

##### **Day 3: Deepening our Awareness of the Power of Sound**

Centering/Opening

Experience: Patterning salt

Explanation: The sound of the Big Bang

Expanding the Senses in Worship: Meeting for Worship with Attention to Sound

Twilight Meeting

##### **Day 4: Returning to the Soundwaves with Deepened Awareness**

Centering/Opening

Experience: Chanting, Oboe, Toning, Drumming as vehicles for sound

Expanding the Senses in Worship: Meeting for Worship with Attention to Sound

Twilight Meeting

**Day 5: Faithfulness to kenning leadings**

Centering/Opening

Experience: Guided listening. Travelling on a tone, Circle for Sharing

Explanation: Walter Wink on faithfulness to leadings AND NOT ONE THING MORE

Expanding the Senses in Worship: Meeting for Worship with Attention to Sound

Twilight Meeting

Repertoire of Activities

The following table lists some of the activities I've found useful for introducing participants to the experience of kenning. Others may be invented during the week or join the list between now and the workshop. Selecting an activity for a day's work builds on these options, but also depends on Spirit's inventive and not-always-tidy direction.

Name	Purpose	Description
<b>Experience: Skill building</b>		
Travelling on a tone	Practice the <b>kenning</b> skill of sinking into a sound and letting it lead one	
Tuning forks and bells	Practice the <b>kenning</b> skill of sinking into a sound and letting it lead one	
Chanting, Oboe, Toning, Drumming as vehicles for sound	Experience different vehicles for the <b>kenning</b> skill of sinking into a sound and letting it lead one	
Guided Listening		
<b>Explanation: Deepening Understanding and Confidence</b>		
Circle for sharing	Elicit participants' own context for learning about <b>kenning</b>	Using a talking stick, people share associations and experiences of being transported or changed by sound. Sometimes this can also be framed to solicit questions or puzzlements.
Text exploration	Explore examples of mystical experiences with sound	<i>Describe here texts such as Fox's journal, the keening poem, anything else you might hand out and discuss</i>
Patterning salt	Although this is experiential, its purpose is to help participants see concrete evidence of the power of sound to move the physical universe	<i>Describe the vibration phenomenon we saw in you-tube</i>
The Sound of the Big Bang	Understand the power of sound	<i>Describe the you-tube clip</i>
<b>Expanding the Senses in Worship</b>		
Meeting for Worship with Attention to Sound	Experiment with <b>kenning</b> in the context of Quaker worship	Participants center down into traditional Quaker worship with a diverse array of sounds introduced by the clerk/teacher at intervals to invite worshippers to use the tones for travelling at Spirit's leading.
Twilight Meeting	Demonstrate how Spirit moves through a gathered worship	Participants share (in a continuation of worshipful space) what happened for them in the preceding silent worship. Introduced and described elsewhere in a pamphlet by Mary R. Hopkins, this powerful tool makes visible other people's experience of a shared practice.

