

A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Seventeen

Eighth Month 1982

Dear Friend,

One of the special benefits of publishing *A Friendly Letter* is receiving and reading the many letters I get from you in response. My file marked "AFL-Correspondence" is bulging with almost 200 letters, an average of at least 12 per issue, a remarkable total considering the relatively small circulation of the letter. A number of you have asked whether it would be possible to publish letters, but it is my judgment that this is impractical, at least as a regular feature, because of the limited space and the press of the news coverage and other items.

At the same time, I think it is important to offer you at least occasionally some sense of the range and flavor of the feedback I have been getting. That's what this issue is designed to do; it is the first of what will be at least an annual series of "Feedback issues," in which you will have a chance to read samples of the responses previous issues of *A Friendly Letter* have evoked.

There is, of course, much more in my file than can appear here: corrections of my occasionally substandard grammar; comments on most of the topics I have reported on; two cancellations (not out of anger, fortunately, but rather due to the infirmities of age), a few poems--and no lack of both eldery and support.

I hope you enjoy these excerpts. Because it was not clear whether some correspondents wished to be identified by name, I have left names out of the citations. Besides these brief quotations in print, I attempt to answer all the letters I receive (sometimes rather tardily), and will continue to do so as long as you are moved to send them. I think of my readers as an informal Committee of Oversight, and take your comments seriously even when I don't agree.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

PS. This was the issue in which I promised to report the results of my informal poll of readers on the question of whether this letter ought to be laid out in double-columns rather than the current single-column arrangement. Reader sentiment was overwhelmingly in favor of the status quo; and since this fits my own inclinations, that's how it will stay for now. My thanks to those who expressed their opinions.

PPS. I recently learned that bulk mailings are usually only 90% or so delivered; this means that just about every subscriber can expect to miss one issue or so per year. I regret this, but we must cope with the postal system as best we can; if you have not received an issue, please let me know and I will replace it promptly.

One of my objectives in publishing this newsletter is to reach out to Friends of all varieties in America. While I have a long way to go in achieving this, my thick letters file indicates that I am in contact with Quakers of a wide range of opinion, at least on many of the issues that have been reported and commented on here. Take, for instance, the whole question of Quaker ecumenical contacts: What should they include? How can we pursue them? Are they even a good idea? My correspondents are not all sure they are, as was one from southern California of a strongly Evangelical background, who noted that when he attended a joint meeting with some Liberal Friends, "that was an eye-opener. All we really had in common was that we breathed the same air and walked upright." He held out only one hope for ecumenical fellowship among different Quaker groups: "The solution, then, can only come when the liberals of whatever distance from the Biblical truth, come to acknowledge that Jesus Christ is not only the Son of God but God the Son. Until then the groups have a different God, a different Saviour, a different Bible and a different destiny. How can there be a pretense that with this yawning gulf between them, there is some basis for getting together?...So when the liberals get saved, then we can have fellowship, and not before."

Two Sides of a Quaker Coin?

On the other hand, a Liberal Friend from Philadelphia expressed quite similar sentiments from the opposite end of the spectrum. She reported that attending the Wichita Conference of Friends in 1977 and meeting other Quaker groups left her "in a state of culture shock," and had her wondering, "Is bridge-building really possible here--is it, in fact even desirable? These are matters in which the division of opinion runs so deep that I doubt whether the parties can ever come together, and trying to stretch the blanket of 'Quakerism' to cover them may be a disservice to all parties." Another such Friend, from New York, voiced his discouragement over such efforts: "...If someone is possessed of the Only Revealed Truth and is bound by command of his deity to see that I accept this truth, I may either try to exist under unyielding pressure or stand clear. I believe it's a waste of energy for us to gather together in a state of tension which distracts from devotion to other and more vital concerns....The evangelical spirit...is growing powerful in the United States now, and it's plain it has kindled that same spirit among some Friends even higher. And in the end, it is Light, not heat, that I seek."

Still another view was shared, somewhat sheepishly, by a young woman Friend living in the Caribbean: "Before receiving your newsletter," she admitted, "I didn't even know there *was* such a thing as conservative Evangelical Christian Quakers....So my first thought, upon reading that this group was about to split off from the rest was, 'Fine, let them.' But after reading the rest...I came to have a better understanding of the need for Quaker bridgebuilding." It is my sense that such tunnel vision is a common affliction among us, at both ends of the spectrum, and even in the middle.

How To Deal With Demon Rum

Responses to my Issue #13, which decried the abandonment of our testimony on alcohol, were similarly varied. I heard from a distinguished elder Friend in the West, who noted that "My grandfather was a great temperance worker in England and Ireland. He had coffee shops in Belfast next to saloons, and people would stand by the saloon door and try to get young people to go in their coffee shop where they were asked to sign the pledge promising never to take strong drinks! My father...always voted the Prohibition ticket except when he voted for (William Jennings) Bryan, who was for prohibition. I worked hard to help bring in prohibition....Prohibition was a great success." Furthermore, while he supported numerous measures to cut down on alcohol abuse, he still affirmed that "The real solution is Prohibition with real enforcement."

From the East, however, came an equally eloquent missive which, while

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And thank thee plainly, Friend!

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The days and months ahead promise to be an exciting, fast-moving period in American Quaker history: Groups that have been estranged for decades are talking to and learning from each other. There is widespread concern for deeper engagement with our Quaker and Christian heritage. We face ever graver challenges to our Testimonies in a dangerous nuclear age.

Every month, A Friendly Letter brings a growing number of thoughtful readers reports on these developments within the Society of Friends, reports they don't get anywhere else. Written with a unique combination of journalistic skills and religious commitment, and published in a compact four-page format, A Friendly Letter has been out in front on the important Quaker news and issues since it first appeared in early 1981.

Sometimes Quaker life is marked by tension and struggle. A Friendly Letter has been unmatched in reporting on such conflicts first, and in a fair and friendly manner. Some of its disclosures and comments have sparked controversy; but every issue has been as interesting and unpredictable as the rich Quaker culture it chronicles.

Each issue is also enlivened by two other features: a glimpse of our fascinating past in This Month in Quaker History, and samples of that special Friendly brand of Quaker Chuckles.

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agreeing that "the concern about alcoholism...is a most worthy one," still insisted that "moves toward governmental Prohibition in the sour tradition of the old Volstead Act, I would stand against. The national corruption brought about by that Act was disastrous and permanent; we have never recovered from it in diminution of moral values and increase of cynicism.

"And, of course," this letter went on, "in governmental dealing with drugs today...we are reliving Prohibition. The same story all over; a false market established, a false price attached to the product, a glamor invested in it, and consequent disaster. We seem to learn nothing at all from history: moral and sumptuary codes are almost invitations to defiance....The use of alcohol," this writer concluded, "demands the attention of all Friends, and I can only pray that they give it that attention without self-righteousness."

Criticizing the Quaker Critics of AFSC

Speaking of Friends' attention, perhaps no issue engaged it like Issue #6, which summarized some concerns about the American Friends Service Committee. One representative letter, from a distinguished Quaker lobbyist, began, "I was distressed when I read your newsletter on the AFSC the other day. I thought it was unfortunate, in some ways intemperate, and somewhat inaccurate." "Talk about credibility!!" blazed another: "Your language was all too journalistically purple....I certainly feel that this article of yours was exploitative....I found some of your assertions to be untrue and inflammatory." There were several more like this, some calmer, some angrier, all in the same vein.

Yet for each critical letter, there was a supportive one. An Iowa Friend stated succinctly, "I felt the article you wrote was on target." Another wrote that the issue "seemed to be a well-done, non-shrill-constructive criticism type issue to me." A third said "Thanks for your article on AFSC. It is certainly true that there is much concern and worry about AFSC by Friends of all flavours." What is one to make of this? I think the last comment was perhaps the truest one; my mail certainly corroborates it.

The Good News: Friends Being Friendly

But controversy is not the only thing my letter file contains. It also includes impressive reports of growing contacts among Friends of different backgrounds, contacts that respected differences but did not allow them to remain barriers. One reader wrote from Oregon to confess that "I grew up with a lot of stereotypes and active disinterest in the other Friends across town. I had to travel to national and international conferences before I found out that other Quakers are valuable people....It's maybe too bad that I didn't travel across town to find that out sooner." But better late than never!

Another very impressive report came from the former Clerk of a Conservative Meeting, which described the group's experience in facing up to internal differences. "The key," he concluded, "is how anger is brought to the surface and faced." In his Meeting, "we found a way to harmoniously accept a wide range of opinions about such issues as: dress at meeting, music in meeting, conscientious objection...the 'Communist Menace', sexual preferences and lifestyles."

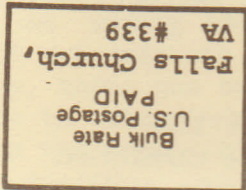
How did they achieve harmony? "I believe that two ingredients to growth...were critical: open discussion and working together. Having a Pre-Meeting with a different family in charge each week(of)...the discussion content helped immensely. It was understood that the issues might be controversial....A variety of intense expressions was shared, some of which would have been hurtful were we not deliberately acting to openly share emotions. Understanding and willingness to compromise grew out of this format time and again." Meeting work projects and frequent fellowship occasions also knitted the group together despite continuing diversity. This letter closed with an eloquent plea for communication:

"Just as we cannot take our worldly possessions to the grave; neither can we take our fractious opinions....We would easily urge each other to share our wealth for good purpose. Can we not share the possibility of some rightness in others' views and some wrong in our own and thus be able to live harmoniously...while there is still time?"

Amen to that! And keep writing, Friends.

TO A FRIENDLY LETTER

INSIDE: TALKING BACK



From: Chuck Fager, A Friendly Letter
P.O. Box 1361
Baileys Crossroads, VA 22041

THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

Early this month in 1675, King Philip, the chief of the New England Wampanoag Indians, escaped a pursuing military force into the vast wooded wilderness of central Massachusetts, and spread the violence of what became known as King Philip's War throughout the length of Massachusetts Bay, Plymouth, Rhode Island and most of Connecticut colonies. For months the colonists' military forces could do little to stop him: they were poorly-trained, and tried to use classic European tactics against a guerilla-style foe. The raids and slaughter, especially in outlying settlements, were awful and indiscriminate.

The trials for Friends that grew out of this war were many: in Boston, the Puritan clergy saw the war as a judgment on Bostonians' backsliding--one evidence of which was their failure to persecute the Quakers among them. A wave of jailing and whipping and banishment--the last one, fortunately--broke out again in the colony. In Rhode Island, which had become a refuge for victims of Puritan intolerance, Friends were in command of the government. They tried hard to stay out of the war; then, when dragged in by an invasion of a force from Plymouth, they tried to avoid raising a militia, urging settlers to move to the most settled island for safety. Ultimately, however, war hysteria temporarily forced the Friends out of power, and a militia was raised. By then, though, the summer of 1676, the Puritan armies had been rescued by two unexpected allies: hunger and disease among the Indians, who had been deprived of their regular crops by the war. By Eighth Month, the war was all but over, King Philip was a desperate fugitive. He moved back toward Rhode Island, near his old home village. There, on 8/12/1676, he was killed in a surprise early-morning attack. When the war ended, Quakers again were elected to most key offices in Rhode Island.

QUAKER CHUCKLE

William Penn had two aunts who opened a bakery in London. They were among the Quaker shopkeepers who charged fixed prices for their wares, in contrast to the trading customs of the time, and they became widely-known for the excellence of their meat and fruit pies. When a wave of persecution broke out and many Friends were jailed, these women, who were spared, decided to raise money for the prisoners and their families by increasing their prices. This caused quite a stir among their clientele. In fact, it is said that for weeks the whole neighborhood was up in arms over the pie rates of Penn's aunts.

--With thanks to Toby Riley and apologies to Messrs. Sullivan and Gilbert