A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Twenty-Four Third Month, 1983

Dear Friend,

Well, here we are--two years old! It hardly seems possible that it was that long ago when the first issue came out. I want to thank those of you who have been with me since then, as well as those who have come aboard since. The pace of activity among American Quakers has not slowed down since *A Friendly Letter* first appeared, so as the way opens we will be sending out issues for a good while to come.

And along with future issues will probably, alas, come more errors, especially typographical errors. Typos are the crabgrass in the broad green fields of a writer-editor's imagination. I was particularly embarrassed last month to discover that I had left off a whole crucial line in my announcement of the second annual Peace Poster and Bumpersticker Contest: namely that the two contests had different age requirements: the poster contest is for young Friends under 13; the bumpersticker contest is for those under 17. A revised flyer is enclosed, which I hope will clear up the confusion.

One other item needs to be entered here, for the record: over the past two years, I have been accumulating from various sources a mailing list of Quakers and like-minded people around the country. From time to time this mailing list is rented to other groups for fundraising efforts. All my subscribers are on this list. But if you do not want to be on the list that is made available to other groups, please drop me a line and say so, and I will delete you from it.

I also want to take note of the fact that we just received a preliminary listing of the planned workshops for the 1983 FGC Gathering in Slippery Rock, Pa., in Seventh Month, and I was very impressed by it. It has been my contention that Friends need both to engage with their religious roots in the Christian and Jewish traditions, and to press forward with the universalistic character of our faith, without being dismayed by the paradox that this involves us in; life is a paradox anyway. And this FGC schedule is perhaps the best example of doing just that that I have seen: workshops on Christian faith, several on the Bible, as well as others on a broad range of concerns and manifestations of Quaker life today. FGC, like other Quaker groups, has its problems and limitations, but in my observation, there is not another umbrella group among us today showing anywhere near this much range and Friendly adventurousness. I hope many Friends who have not been to a gathering before will seriously consider attending this year--especially Friends from other traditions. We need the cross-fertilization and the challenge, and FGC is a time when such Friendly encounters are encouraged and nurtured. (By the way, this is not a paid advertisement, but a free testimonial!)

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

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SOME THOUGHTS ON QUAKERS AND FEMINISM

Do Quakerism and feminism automatically go together? To judge from our history, one might think so. But in recent years, evidence of this connection has not been as abundant as before. Does this mean Quaker women are less feminist than before--or could it mean that the relationship between the two is more complicated than it appears?

In 1975, for instance, a student at Hampshire College in Massachusetts, Elizabeth Walker, wrote a senior thesis on the topic, "Feminism and Contemporary Quaker Women." In it she reported on interviews with a large number of Quaker women in the western Massachusetts area. She found them to be, overall, a very impressive group: strong, independent, educated, active; about as "liberated" as she could want. But one thing about them puzzled her: few of them identified with or had strong ties to the current wave of feminist organizations.

Walker is not the only one to puzzle over this fact. Margaret Bacon, an AFSC staffer who has written extensively about Quaker women, takes note of it in her 1980 book, *As the Way Opens: The Story of Quaker Women in America.* Bacon also reports on a conversation with the editor of a current volume on Notable American Women, who asked why there were fewer Quakers in the new edition than in previous ones covering earlier periods of American history. Several possible explanations were offered for these developments, among them: the relative decline in the proportion of Friends in the U.S. population; the recent focus by Quakers, male and female, on peace issues; a resistance to separatist tendencies among some modern feminists; even perhaps a certain complacency and lack of raised consciousness.

A Modest Inquiry: Do Quakers Have Their Own Kind of Feminism?

All these explanations may contain some truth, yet I have long wondered if there could be another possible explanation, one which makes more sense of this and much other data. That other explanation is perhaps best put as a query: *Could there be a specifically Quaker strain of feminism, one rooted in the basic Quaker religious outlook, persisting throughout our history and still capable of shaping women's lives?* I have been asking this question ever since reading Elizabeth Walker's thesis; and my hunch that this is the case has been reinforced by further observation, reading in Quaker history, and study of the work of recent Quaker women scholars such as Margaret Bacon and Carol Stoneburner of Guilford College.

Still, to my knowledge the idea of a specific Quaker feminism, related to but distinct from other varieties, has not yet been clearly articulated and put forth for examination. The closest thing to such an articulation may have come in 1979, when Carol Stoneburner Guilford College's Coordinator of Women's Studies, organized a conference on "American Quaker Women as Shapers of Human Space." When they are eventually published, the papers delivered at the conference, along with Stoneburner's detailed analytical introduction, may well provide a clear presentation of this concept. I hope they will be published soon.

Some Possible Characteristics of Quaker Feminism

One thing about Elizabeth Walker's description of contemporary Quaker women that pointed toward a Quaker feminism was that many of the women she interviewed reminded me of Quaker women of earlier centuries: there seemed to be a persistent, recognizeable pattern, a living tradition being manifested in their lives. Take, for instance, the matter of family involvement versus work outside the home: Quaker women from the beginning have repeatedly refused to accept this distinction as a dichotomy of mutually exclusive options. This phenomenon, Carol Stoneburner points out, even extended to the many Quaker women who chose not to marry: while independent and active, they have also typically tended to be tied into family networks, either directly as aunts, sisters and daughters, or indirectly through their Meeting

There are other characteristics that stick out in descriptions of Quaker women through the generations: a sturdy, sometimes idiosyncratic individualism; a practical bent; and usually a multi-issue agenda, or at least an awareness of the broader context in which specific concerns exist.

It is not hard to imagine how such an abiding combination of traits could, at different times, result in varying relationships with outside feminist movements, at one time thrusting Quaker women like Lucretia Mott and Alice Paul to the forefront, and at other times leading them to work more on their own, perhaps more on other concerns. It doesn't make them less feminist, but is rather evidence of the influence of another kind of feminism.

If there is a Quaker feminism, though, its roots would have to be traceable back to the fundamentals of Friends' religious experience; it would be necessary to be able to show that this vision supplied its form, motive force, and staying power. Most Friends know that the earliest Quakers permitted women to speak and go out as missionaries, which was drastically against the practice of the time. George Fox was a stalwart of this view, writing two pamphlets defending the Friends' radical innovation within the first decade of the movement's life.

But this vision was set forth most commandingly perhaps by Margaret Fell, who issued a pamphlet on the topic from a prison cell in 1666. This pamphlet, entitled *Womens Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures, All such as speak by the Spirit and Power of the Lord JESUS,* has been recently reprinted by New England Yearly Meeting. In it Fell declares flatly that "God hath put no such difference between the Male and Female as men would make." Further, "...Christ in the Male and in the Female is one; and where he is made manifest in Male and Female, he may speak...." She also proudly points out places in Bible where God and Christ are described as female, including even the New Jerusalem in the climactic vision of the Book of Revelation, Chapter 21: "...and this," she proclaims, "is that Woman and Image of the Eternal God, that God hath owned, and doth own, and will own for evermore." For the first Friends, this New Jerusalem, the Bride of Christ, was not some future possibility; it was something that was happening *now:* "...our holy city," Fell declares, "the New Jerusalem, is coming down from Heaven, and her Light will shine throughout the whole earth, even as a Jasper stone, clear as Christal, which brings freedom and liberty, and perfect Redemption to her whole Seed...."

Quaker Feminism: Religious at the Root

In short, for Margaret Fell, as for other early Friends, the equality of women was not a deduction from some other religious doctrine, but was part of the essence of their religious experience itself. (It is intriguing, by the way, to read her 317-year old broadside, and then look at the debate now raging over women's roles in many conservative Christian churches, and find the same arguments being presented, though in many cases not yet with much success for the women. This is how far ahead early Friends were of many segments of Christianity.)

Another central aspect of the Friends religious witness was that this male-female God was manifest to individuals without the necessity of outward mediators; God's spirit was "poured out" on men and women alike, and all were called to follow their Teacher within as faithfully as they could. Doesn't it make sense that certain concrete effects --such as identification with both family and the world, strong individualism, practicality and a broad vision--would flow naturally from such an experience?

Quaker Feminism: What Shall We Make Of It?

Margaret Bacon sums up this vision and its impact thus: "The Quakers had never set out to champion equal rights but to walk in the Light as they saw it for their day. That Light had led them from a simple desire to equip their daughters as well as their sons...to a concern for equality of opportunity as broad as all mankind." Could such a religious calling also be the basis for a Quaker feminism, a tradition which, though not articulated as such, still could have a clear and liberating impact on many women's lives over three centuries?

At any rate, so it has seemed to me. I encourage reader response to this hypothesis: Do you think there is a distinct form of Quaker religious feminism? If so, how can we better define, understand and nourish it? How can/should it be related to other kinds of feminism? What are its possibilities and problems today? Let me hear your thoughts.

INSIDE: QUAKERS AND FEMINISM--
HOW ARE THEY CONNECTED?

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THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

U.S. presidents used to be inaugurated in Third Month, and in 1913, the new president taking the oath was Woodrow Wilson. But the inauguration was interrupted by a parade of 5000 women marching up Pennsylvania Avenue demanding the vote for their sex. The woman's suffrage movement had been quiet for a number of years, and this parade, which was promptly set upon by a mob, with no police protection being offered, brought the issue abruptly back into public awareness.

And wouldn't you know, the main organizer of the march was a Quaker, Alice Paul, who had worked in England with militant suffragettes there, and had only recently returned to her native country determined to apply those tactics here. The campaign for woman's suffrage rapidly heated up again after the march, and within a year, on 3/19/1914, the Susan B. Anthony Amendment(as the woman's suffrage bill was named, after another Quaker) was brought to a vote in the Senate--and defeated. Thereafter the movement became increasingly militant, with civil disobedience leading to jail terms and hunger strikes for Alice Paul and others. Once the bill finally became law, in late 1920, Alice Paul was not inclined to stop her work. So she wrote another amendment, guaranteeing equal treatment to women. We know it as the Equal Rights Amendment; she named it after, who else but another Quaker: The Lucretia Mott Amendment.

QUAKER CHUCKLES

Casting Light on the Subject

How many Quakers does it take to change a meetinghouse light bulb? Why, the whole congregation, of course. One Friend can install it, to be sure--but only after the rest have weightily considered whether they wouldn't be bearing a truer testimony of Simplicity by learning to get along without it.

Waiting For the Light

Then there was the rural Friends meeting of a pastoral bent which was too poor to support a fulltime pastor, so it shared one with another meeting in the area. One First Day morning a visitor happened in, and found the congregation sitting in silence. The visitor joined them, and waited, at first expectantly, then impatiently, through more than an hour of quiet. Finally, when offered a handshake, the visitor remarked, "Is this all there is to a Quaker meeting?" "Oh, heavens, no," was the reply. "The pastor's not due in til next week."