

A Friendly Letter

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Dear Friend,

AIDS. You can hardly pick up a newspaper, or turn on a television or radio, without hearing about it. As Friends, like other groups, begin to feel the impact of this disease directly, it seemed right to take a closer look here at what the presence of AIDS can mean for individual Friends and meetings. To get such a glimpse I asked Bill Kreidler of Boston to prepare the article on the inside pages. Bill is a freelance writer, author of the book Creative Conflict Resolution, published by Scott, Foresman and Company. He is also co-clerk of Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns. His piece is a preliminary report; we are just beginning to grasp the challenge of AIDS to the Society of Friends as a religious community.

This article does not deal with the issue of the legitimacy of homosexuality; but let there be no evasion here: It has long been my conviction that homosexuality is not by definition evil. Gays and lesbians who unite with Friends' ways and testimonies have as much right to a place in the Society as anyone else. Further, committed gay and lesbian relationships which are submitted to and can pass the scrutiny of a clearness committee in good order deserve to be taken under the care and oversight of their meetings just as are heterosexual marriages.

It is gratifying to see a growing number of meetings sharing this view. I have written elsewhere of three lesbian Quaker weddings that occurred in recent years. In the last several months, there have been two similar ceremonies recognizing the commitment of gay male couples: one at University Meeting in Seattle in Sixth Month, and another at Homewood Meeting in Baltimore on 10/5. It is my own judgment that the support thus shown longterm relationships among gay men can make an important contribution to slowing the spread of AIDS; but in any case, the nurture of love is or should be one of the main items of Quaker business.

It is too bad that there remain places in the Society where it is hoped that homosexuality among Friends will somehow fade back into the silence of the closet. The futility of this hope is shown in one important instance by the confirmation last summer of Ron Mattson, an open gay Friend, as clerk of Nebraska Yearly Meeting. Nebraska is part of Friends United Meeting, in which honest engagement with these issues has been repeatedly suppressed, at great cost to the group. Now it has surfaced again. Mattson's suitability for Nebraska's clerkship reportedly was extensively threshed in the YM sessions, not as to his qualifications (he is a longtime and respected member), but rather as to whether his visibility could be tolerated within FUM's councils. The YM ultimately decided it was worth a try; now we shall see. He has our congratulations and prayers.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

FRIENDS AND AIDS
By Bill Kreidler

I had seen several friends die from AIDS, but that still did not prepare me for my first visit to Howard in the Intensive Care Unit last summer. I could hardly connect the heavily sedated body in the hospital bed, punctured by tubes and surrounded with equipment that flashed, beeped and wheezed, with the Howard I knew. That Howard was a mainstay of Beacon Hill Meeting in Boston. He was a man who laughed, welcomed newcomers, railed at injustice, studied the Bible, dined at the Ritz, and was always, always a seeker of Truth. He carried heavy loads of pain and anger, leavened by a large measure of Light. He shared it all with us. He was fully alive and thoroughly involved in life. But if that was Howard, then who was this, dying in this bed? I was afraid to admit I knew.

Howard had been admitted to the hospital with pneumonia a week before my visit. Several days later the AIDS diagnosis had been confirmed. Howard had always considered Beacon Hill Meeting his family, and now we discovered that we would have to act as his family in ways we had never imagined. We visited regularly, although Howard was so heavily sedated that it was an act of faith to believe he could hear or even knew that people were present. Meetings for worship were held in the hospital waiting room. Friends from far away were contacted; we helped with funeral arrangements. We stayed in close communication with each other during this vigil. Together we worshipped, sang, prayed and waited.

AIDS Begins to Claim Quaker Victims

Beacon Hill is a closely knit meeting, but never before had I experienced such bonds of love, light and blessed community as in the three weeks of Howard's illness and subsequent death. You might say it was his last gift to us. At the same time, never had I been so frightened. The passive figure in that bed was more to me than Howard. It was a tangible vision of my own mortality. I grieved for Howard, and I grieved for myself; next time, it could be me.

Shortly after Howard's death another gay Friend named Henry also died of AIDS, in New York City. His meeting was likewise deeply affected by the experience. A little later a Friend said to me, "It's finally happened. AIDS has come to the Quakers." Not that I ever thought it wouldn't. For the past two years it had been a matter of wondering and waiting. I haven't stopped doing either.

Like most gay men these days, I live constantly with the knowledge of AIDS, and a complex mixture of fear, anger and regret commonly called "AIDS anxiety". Most of the time I carry my AIDS anxiety in my hip pocket, under some kind of control. But now and then it lodges in my throat and threatens to choke me. Either way it forces me to continually reevaluate my life and my priorities.

Responses to AIDS--Changing Plans, Dodging Bullets

I'm not the only one who is reevaluating. Recently my friend Ron called to say that he was giving up his volunteer work for peace to work instead in the struggle against AIDS. He acknowledged that the peacework was still important, but he said, "It's as if I'm standing in the street and hearing someone around the corner cry for help. I want to help, but there's someone right behind me pulling a gun on me." I knew exactly what he meant. What's more, that gun is loaded with more than a deadly virus. It also contains bullets packed with powerful social consequences.

After all, no disease exists in a social vacuum, least of all AIDS. Its main victims, homosexuals and intravenous drug users, are outcast groups. Its primary mode of transmission among gay men is sexual contact, a fact that discomforts many. Most people see AIDS as a "gay disease," brought about by gay male promiscuity. This perception is a potent weapon in the hands of anyone who wants to take advantage of it--and many do.

Last year a prominent gay leader remarked to me, "It is inconceivable to me that AIDS will not be used as a weapon against the lesbian and gay community." He was right. To give just two recent and important examples: Texas' anti-sodomy statutes were reinstated, and the

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Few if any Quaker publications have caused as much talk and controversy per page as **A Friendly Letter** since it first appeared in mid-1981. That's because every month since then it has brought a growing number of readers a unique series of solidly-researched, searching reports on the key issues, problems and prospects of American Quakerism in the 1980s. A great many of these reports have been the first, or the only accounts of major issues to appear in a Quaker publication. Maybe that's why, among the hundreds of letters to editor-publisher Chuck Fager from Quakers of all varieties, so many have praised it. Here are a few of the comments:

"This is a chance for me to say again how important A Friendly Letter is to so many of us and what a superlative job you are doing with it." --A liberal New York Friend.

"Thy objective of reaching out to Friends of all varieties is essential, if the Religious Society of Friends is to survive." --A conservative Friend, Ohio.

"You would have been pleased to hear the discussion about renewing A Friendly Letter at our last Monthly Meeting. We agreed firmly that we did not always agree with you-- but we agreed even more firmly that we appreciated your willingness to talk about and present information on subjects Quakers wish would just go away." --Des Moines, Iowa.

"I think you are doing the most important work among Quakers today and I have wanted you to know it for some time." --A California Friend.

To be fair, **A Friendly Letter** has also occasionally been called irresponsible, inaccurate, even "a gutter press." But if you are concerned about the present and future of Quakerism in America, perhaps you should form your own opinion about it. It's easy to subscribe; just use the coupon below.

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Massachusetts legislature soundly defeated a gay rights bill. In both instances "halting the spread of AIDS" was a major justification. Some other recent, widely-known threats to the civil rights of AIDS patients and homosexuals include the cases of schoolchildren with AIDS, the military's use of HTLV-3 screening, the quarantine proposals of Jerry Falwell and others.

But far more common and less well-known are the daily denials of basic civil rights experienced by many AIDS patients. These include loss of jobs, eviction from their homes, denial of health insurance, being shunned by family and friends--even rejection of their corpses by some morticians, all because of the unreasonable public fear of AIDS. In times of public panic, concern for civil rights often goes out the window, especially when the rights of the groups involved are poorly protected to begin with. But AIDS is not a "gay disease". Diseases do not have sexual orientations. Denying anyone their civil rights is not going to halt its spread. Only research, education and sufficient money to fund both will do that.

Mobilizing A Community at Risk

The lesbian and gay community has rallied as never before to fight AIDS: to ease the suffering of victims, to protect the rights of all, and to support the search for a cure. Nearly every city now has an AIDS information project. In many places there are also visitation and home health aide programs, canned food drives, counseling programs, escort services and even hospices. Extensive educational campaigns have been mounted within the gay community on preventive measures. "Safe sex" practices (sexual activity with no exchange of bodily fluids) have been widely promoted and seem to be having an effect; the AIDS growth rate may have slowed a little in the gay community last year. In addition, AIDS organizations and lesbian and gay legal groups have taken to the courts where more and more AIDS-related discrimination cases are being litigated. Attorney time is frequently donated in these cases, but the costs of such litigation are still high.

Unfortunately, because AIDS is seen as a "gay disease", most of the funding and person power for these programs has come from the lesbian and gay community. But AIDS is spreading at such a rate that the lesbian and gay community cannot keep carrying these burdens alone.

Coping With AIDS--What Friends Can Do

The AIDS crisis touches two traditional Quaker concerns: the impartial alleviation of suffering, and the protection of civil rights. There are many ways Friends can help:

- **By learning about AIDS, its cause, effects and treatment. Second to the disease itself, ignorance and misinformation are the greatest dangers posed by the disease.

- **By writing to state and federal legislators to urge that more money be allocated to AIDS research and relief efforts.

- **By keeping a watchful eye on lawmakers and the courts to prevent civil rights violations under the specious label of protecting public health.

- **By giving money, time and talent to AIDS organizations to support their work.

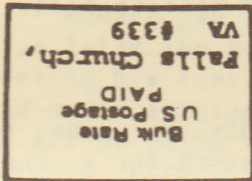
Finally, as a gay man and a Friend I ask that you remember the gay men in your meetings--and we are found in programmed and unprogrammed meetings alike. Most of us are coming to terms with our own mortality anywhere from twenty to thirty years earlier than we might otherwise expect to do so. This process is painful, difficult and frightening. It can lead to our living life more fully. It can also lead to our running scared. Being part of a genuine, accepting spiritual community can make a big difference, and other Friends can help by offering their love and support. We at Beacon Hill did our best last summer for Howard and each other. More and more meetings will soon be called upon to cope with similar situations. I know of at least one large meeting in which, to prepare for this eventuality, informal but searching discussions among gay and straight Friends have been going on for some time. That's a good idea.

The First Day after Howard died, Ann, a lesbian in my meeting, stood during worship and said, "Howard's death makes me want to hold the other gay men in the meeting more tenderly in the Light. I want to tell them how much I love and value them."

We need that. We need Light. We need your love.

INSIDE: HOW CAN QUAKERS
COPE WITH AIDS?

From: Chuck Fager, A Friendly Letter
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THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

It was in Tenth Month, 1668, that a Friends minister named Thomas Loe died. Loe was not one of the more famous of the First Publishers; he travelled and preached diligently, and there is not a lot more to say. But his preaching made history, because among his converts was one William Penn. Penn had first heard Loe in Ireland at the age of twelve, and found his message convincing. But it was not until 1668, after facing down the fierce opposition of his father, that young Penn felt strong enough in his faith to take on the controversial--and then often dangerous--public identity of a Friend. Indeed, it was Thomas Loe, on his deathbed, who pushed Penn over the threshold. "Taking me by the hand," Penn later wrote, "he spake thus, 'Dear heart, bear thy cross: stand faithful for God and bear thy testimony in thy day and generation and God will give thee an eternal crown of glory, that none shall ever take from thee. There is not another way. This is the way the holy men of old walked in, and it shall prosper.'"

Penn took the advice; within a few months he had published a major essay on Quaker beliefs called The Sandy Foundation Shaken. It was an impressive debut: he was thrown into the Tower of London for it. And the rest, as they say, is history.

QUAKER CHUCKLES

A Flowery Speech

During the World Gathering of Young Friends last summer, one plenary session considered a minute opposing apartheid. The minute was adopted, but not before some Friends expressed scepticism as to the value and impact of such minutes. An Oregon Friend, Bob Baird, articulated this view best when he paraphrased Jesus: "Consider the lilies of the field," he said; "how many minutes do they write?"

A Mynah Disturbance

Back in 1964, Northern Half-Yearly Meeting held a session at the Historical Society of Wausau, Wisconsin. Once assembled, the Northern Friends discovered that their hosts had in residence a pet mynah bird, who would screech "Historical Society!" whenever a telephone rang. That the beast had a larger vocabulary, however, the visitors only discovered during worship. A Friend rose from the silence and began to speak, only to have the bird call out "Aw, shut up!"

(Thanks to Raquel Wood.)
