

A Friendly Letter

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Fifth Month, 1986

Dear Friend,

Is thee ready for a change of pace? I am; so instead of an expose or a critique, this month's offering is a profile of a Friend in the media, National Public Radio's Scott Simon. Besides being a Quaker, Scott Simon also happens to be one of my favorite broadcast personalities, and in my professional opinion a fine journalist as well. Those readers who do not already listen to NPR news programs can consider yourselves eldred, urged to give up at least enough of your more creaturely entanglements to be able to fit one or more of these broadcasts into your day. Thee won't regret it.

Before getting to the profile, however, let us pause for a brief update: In Issue #57 we reported on the surprising trends in membership growth among various YMs, with most unprogrammed groups growing and most programmed bodies declining in numbers. The biggest surprise in our tally was Philadelphia YM, which in 1984 cut its generation-long decline sharply, by half, and seemed on the verge of an upswing in membership. However, the figures for 1985 make the earlier numbers seem like a fluke: The 1985 figures are in, and Philadelphia has resumed its previous rate of decline, losing 147 members, almost twice 1984's total of 76. The 1985 figure reflected a drop in applications, births and the number of children, and an increase in transfers and releases from membership. Scattered reports from other unprogrammed YMs, though, indicate continued growth in their ranks, confirming the overall trend.

One other item also needs to be mentioned here as well, having to do with the timing of *A Friendly Letter's* production. I have had inquiries from readers wondering why their copies often arrive in the month after the issue date. It would be easy in this case to blame the Postal Service, which often delays delivery of mail sent by bulk rate. However, the main reason is simply that I usually do not get the newsletter into the mail until the end of the month of publication, so delivery often spills over into the following month. Every four weeks I berate myself for not getting it done and mailed by the fifteenth; and almost every month, it doesn't work out that way. Partly this can be blamed on the Spirit, since I usually don't know for sure what an issue's subject is to be until the time comes to write it; but mostly it has to do with a personal tendency to procrastinate, a failing common among writers and, I'm told, other people. I hope you will continue to bear with me as I work to make what you read here worth the wait.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

PS. Having spoken of favorites above, let me also mention *The Other Side* magazine, a flyer for which is included in subscriber's copies of this issue. It is probably the most consistently impressive magazine relating Christian faith, peace and social justice that I have seen, and I am happy to bring it to your attention.

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At 34, Friend Scott Simon has reached something of a pinnacle at National Public Radio. For ten years he reported for NPR on practically everything from practically everywhere (44 states and numerous countries on three continents, at last count); he guest-hosted extensively on its flagship news shows *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition*; he won awards, and had job feelers from the commercial networks. But perhaps only since last Eleventh Month could one say he has finally "arrived," because that was when he premiered his own two-hour show, *Weekend Edition*, on Saturday mornings. *Weekend Edition* is rising rapidly on the radio charts: it is now broadcast on over one-third of NPR's 300+ stations, including all major American cities. NPR researchers believe the show's potential audience could be huge, possibly their largest: their studies suggest that people are relaxed and ready to listen at that hour, while there's hardly any competition besides TV cartoons. A major benefit for him, Simon insists, is that within the weekly format he is not tied to the microphone as much as are the hosts of *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*. "A weekly show allows me to be a reporter as well as a host," Simon says thankfully.

And report he does, often catching a plane or a train out of Washington within hours of the show's broadcast to do the interviews and taping necessary to nail down a story for next week or the week after. More often than not it is a feature not tied to the morning's headlines in the same way a daily reporter's work must be. In these stories, Simon's own sense of priorities and values often shows through.

"But, Can a Pacifist Cover a War?"

One such priority is his attachment to his hometown of Chicago. Born there of a Jewish father and an Irish Catholic mother, he lived elsewhere but returned there for college in the sixties. It was also in Chicago that his father took him as a teenager to various churches in search of a new religious base. When they visited Northside Friends Meeting, which gathers in homes, Scott Simon found what he wanted. He joined Northside "around 1969". Simon worked with the AFSC in antiwar projects in college; "I spent twelve days in a tiger cage at the University of Chicago," he recalls, and joined the board of the AFSC Chicago office. But he had to resign from the board when he landed his first broadcast news job at a Chicago TV station; the station felt the AFSC's activism could breed conflicts of interest.

The impact of his Quaker outlook on his work has come up several times at NPR as well. Asked to report on the 1977 execution of Gary Gilmore in Utah, he told his boss he was probably not the one for that assignment, since he would feel obliged to make some public protest, however futile, of the act; NPR sent someone else. And when he was preparing to go to El Salvador for the first time in 1983, the big question was, "Can a pacifist cover a war?" He had a long conversation with National Public Radio's news director about this. Simon's answer was a definite yes, but he agreed the question was important. Whatever his NPR superiors' hesitations might have been, they were overcome, because he was sent to Central America twice more--and he covered the U.S. invasion of Grenada in between.

From War Outside To Conflict In the Corridors

To be sure, he insists his war coverage for NPR's listeners was different because of his pacifism: he spent more time talking to ordinary people affected by the fighting than simply reporting military maneuvers and attending briefings with the brass. But it was not stereotypically antiwar coverage either: he also talked to soldiers, in both rebel and official forces, and affirms that he came to respect some members of each. He was even able to understand why US jets could bomb a Grenadian mental hospital: it was, he learned, unmarked, and hostile soldiers inside were firing at American troops. Yes, it was a horrible example of war's destructiveness; but the pilots acted within their rules of engagement, based on their best information, and that's how Simon, as a pacifist and a Quaker, reported it: straight.

Simon asserts that despite the many terrible things he saw in these wars, he was lucky: He never directly confronted a situation in which he had to decide whether to try to intervene in a violent situation to protect innocent victims,



and thus face a pacifist's cruellest nightmare dilemma. But he did ride in a helicopter that came under fire over El Salvador, and was offered (and declined) a rifle by an American GI making a combat sweep in Grenada.

His toughest reporting assignment, though, was one that took him not to a jungle battlefield but up and down the corridors of NPR, during the internal scandals of 1983-84 which almost destroyed the network. Financial mismanagement was uncovered which left NPR deeply in debt, forcing executive resignations and the layoff of over a third of its staff. Scott Simon was tapped to report on this unfolding situation. Why him? "I guess they wanted someone from out of town, and someone whose position seemed secure enough to survive the staff cuts." But the assignment meant, among other things, that he often knew ahead of time which staff people were getting the axe; this made him Mr. Bad News, who was constantly being accosted by anxious colleagues. It also made him unpopular with many local station managers, who found it hard to raise money for their programming while Scott Simon was on the air day after day with new chapters of a seemingly endless tale of financial misfeasance and credit card shenanigans. "I hope never to do anything like that again," he says flatly.

No Thanks, He Won't Drink to That

There are other things Simon doesn't want to do with *Weekend Edition*. Wine stories, for one: Simon is a staunch teetotaler; off in a corner of his cluttered office is a bottle of champagne he received as a gift when *Weekend Edition* premiered; he was too gracious to refuse it, but it still stands there, unopened. He gets many requests for wine reports from local station managers, who are courting a putatively consumerist "Yuppie" audience as a source of new financial contributions to replace NPR's nearly vanished federal support. But he stands firm here, as both a matter of experience (his father was an alcoholic), and as a testimony: "Our culture encourages people to believe that drinking is associated with maturity," he notes, but his view is that "It's basically not good for people." And as a reporter, "It's a question of where do I want to put my weight?" (He did, however, try a piece on several new non-alcoholic wines, asking a local wine merchant to taste test them; she thought they tasted terrible--and again, Simon reported this gloomy judgment straight.)

This is not to suggest, though, that *Weekend Edition* comes down from the satellite clad in somber Quaker grey. By no means: Simon talks about movies, books and sports, often in a very droll way, and, of course, sneaks in plugs for things Chicagoan every chance he gets. Off the air, he likes to recast hoary old jokes into a Quaker format; a brace of examples are included on the next page, though we will skip the one about the suppositories....At the same time, his reporting has staked out some topics as recurrent themes for the show: hunger and homelessness is one set, religion is another; frequently they go together. He has yet to report on an explicitly Quaker group or project, but has come close in a lengthy segment on a visit to a Mennonite college and disaster volunteer relief program.

But Would St. Francis Root For the Cubs?

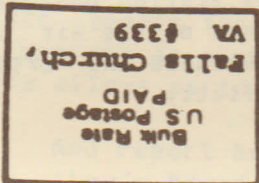
Simon's own theological outlook, in good Quaker fashion, is not easily summarized. He considers himself a Christian, who believes the accounts of Christ's life, death and resurrection. He carries a small Bible in his traveling briefcase, avers that he has read it all, and is quick to refer to it in discussion. Yet he is also careful to point out that he doesn't see his Christianity as an exclusive doctrinal fence; he retains a sense of connection to both sides of his Jewish-Catholic heritage, and was also deeply impressed by his study of Gandhi and a visit to India. He wonders aloud if Christ was really the only redeemer, agreeing ruefully that such a thought probably stamps him as heretical in the eyes of many Christians. Among religious figures, he prefers the simple yet profound spirituality of Saint Francis to any other, and among early Friends he finds the sense of centeredness amid activity evoked by Woolman and Penn more appealing than the sterner, stormier figure of Fox.

Simon's schedule plays havoc with his personal life, but he says he's used to it. "I hope my own center is in my faith rather than my work," he says, "but there's no question that my work is very consistent and fulfilling in those terms." He adds that he wants a family someday; and on his office door is taped a colorful flyer for an evangelical book entitled *Sex and the Single Christian*.



INSIDE: YOU HAVE A FRIEND AT
NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO

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THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

What a scene it must have been at London Yearly Meeting in Fifth Month, 1918. The Chairman and two secretaries of the British Friends Service Committee were charged by the government with having published a leaflet, *A Challenge to Militarism*, without having first submitted it to the wartime censor. Indeed, they had done so, and their court date was set during the yearly meeting sessions. One of the defendants, John H. Barlow, was Clerk that year, and he left the table in mid-session to go to court. In his absence, Mary Jane Godlee served as acting Clerk, and was the first woman to preside over the body. Once at the bar, when the judge retired to reach a verdict Barlow asked the many Friends present to turn the courtroom into a meeting for worship, which they did. Barlow and the other two Friends were nonetheless convicted and served time in prison.

QUAKER CHUCKLES

Joke #1

A Quaker in plain dress walked into a bar and asked for a straight scotch. The bartender, thinking to have fun with the newcomer, charged him ten dollars for the drink. The Quaker looked dour, but paid and ordered another. The bartender collected another ten dollars, and then said, "You know, we don't get many Quakers in here." "And at these prices, Friend" replied the Quaker, "I can see why."

Joke #2

Three companions were driving in farm country; a Hindu, a Jew and a Quaker. Just at nightfall, their car ran out of gas, miles from the nearest town. Seeking shelter, they knocked on the door of the first farmhouse they saw. The farmer said yes, he had two extra beds, but the third person would have to sleep in his barn.

First the Jew volunteered to sleep in the barn; but a little while later there was a banging on the front door, and there he stood. "I can't sleep in that barn," he protested, "there are pigs out there." So the Hindu said he would go. But soon enough the banging began again, and the Hindu was at the door saying, "I can't sleep in that barn--there are cows out there!" Finally the Quaker agreed to try it. And again there was shortly a loud banging at the door. But this time, when the farmer looked out the door he turned and said, "I don't believe it--it's the cows and the pigs!"

--Don't blame me, blame Scott Simon.
