

A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Sixty-Four

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Sixth & Seventh Months, 1986

Dear Friend,

On the Ninth of Sixth Month, I was ready to begin work on Issue #64 of this newsletter. I had a good topic and willing sources, and planned to get it done and mailed before the opening of the annual Friends General Conference Gathering in Minnesota on 6/29.

But Providence, it seems, had other plans. That afternoon, while at work as usual delivering mail in Washington's Virginia suburbs, I began feeling abdominal pains. The pains rapidly got worse, and within an hour I ended up lying on a stranger's lawn while someone called an ambulance. The ride to the hospital was a bit unnerving: After all, this time it was me on the stretcher behind the flashing lights and the siren. What was wrong? Was I going to die?

The emergency room staff worked quickly, and showed no signs of the guarded panic I thought they would if my condition was in fact grave; and soon an X-ray print showed why: There was a sizeable kidney stone lodged in my right ureter. Painful? Oh yes, indeed; but fatal or permanently disabling--no.

Well, that was a relief. But one outcome of the diagnosis was that, as I hope most subscribers have noticed, *A Friendly Letter* was not published in Sixth Month. This is not a small matter to me; missing a deadline is a major infraction for a journalist; perhaps only knowingly publishing a falsehood is worse. For this lapse I ask your pardon; the present double issue is intended to make up for it.

There were other outcomes of that experience as well, some of which I would like to share with you here, as one Friend to another, in the larger context of this letter, which is a spiritual and religious one. For even before I left the emergency room, it became clear to me that dealing with this kidney stone was to be a spiritual as well as a physical task, with profound personal implications.

I knew that not because the pain was calling forth any reservoir of inner fortitude, but for just the opposite reason: over the next several days, it brought me into a relentless, progressive confrontation with some of my illusions about myself, and in particular with my pride in my physical self-image and condition.

I hope you will not think it inappropriate for me to devote part of this issue to a meditative recounting of this ordeal. To be sure, it has little immediate journalistic significance; but it introduced me to what I call the fellowship of suffering, and as that is a group whose membership eventually includes almost all of us, perhaps on the basis of shared experience, I hope it may prove serviceable.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

The big surprise news item this season comes out of Northfield, Minnesota, site of this year's FGC Gathering of Friends, held 6/29-7/5. Northfield's Carleton College was a controversial choice as a Gathering location, because it was hundreds of miles further inland from where previous Gatherings had been held. Many FGC stalwarts were doubtful that the turnout would be large enough to cover expenses; and given FGC's recent spell of financial shakiness, that made the move seem even riskier. Accordingly, the FGC staff planned for an attendance of only 900, close to 500 less than the 1985 total.

But when the dust cleared on 7/5, something remarkable had happened: No less than 1700 Quakers had trooped into Northfield for all or part of the Gathering. For that week Carleton was crowded and crawling with Friends; and the FGC staff spent their time, not worrying over deficits but straining to cope with the overflow. The 1986 Gathering drew more Friends than any since 1976, sharply reversing a trend of declining turnouts in recent years.

Thus while going to Minnesota was a risk, it was one which paid off handsomely; not so much in dollars as in potential enlightenment for many FGC veterans. The unexpected success there brought into focus a condition that I call "**Easternism**," an unspoken but very real outlook which habitually sees the East Coast as the natural center of FGC Quakerism. From the perspective of Easternism, it would be unwise to hold an FGC Gathering more than about 600 miles away from Philadelphia, because that would take it too far away from its base. But the Carleton experience suggests that Easternism is obsolete: the East Coast is no longer the center of FGC's vital constituency, and FGC should reorient its planning accordingly. What might this mean for future Gatherings? Why not California? (Incidentally, in decrying Easternism here, I am criticizing no one more than myself; I was as dubious about having a Gathering in Minnesota as anyone, and said so; fortunately, my advice was ignored.)

More Good News From Northfield

Another notable event at the Gathering was a mission journey which began there for Janet Roache, a woman Friend from Atlanta. Roache works with refugees for a Lutheran service group, helping newcomers from many countries resettle in the deep South. Several years ago she became acquainted with Elisha Wakube, then clerk of the Elgon YM of Friends in Kenya, while Wakube was studying at an Atlanta seminary and attending Atlanta Meeting. Through him and her own work, she developed a growing concern for the women of the Elgon YM in Kenya, and felt a call to find ways that American Friends could be of service to them.

This year, she felt ready to act on her concern. With minutes of support from both Atlanta Meeting and the Southern Appalachian YM, as well as an invitation from Elgon, she asked for a three month unpaid leave of absence from her job and made plans to visit Elgon. There she expects, in her words, "to stay with the women there...and complete a Needs Assessment including job descriptions for positions which might be filled by American Friends who have the skills, interest and dedication to go to Kenya and give of themselves for a year or so. I will then take responsibility for assisting anyone who wishes to go to Kenya and is acceptable to Kenyan Friends to raise the necessary funds and prepare themselves for what they will do there. I will also propose how American Friends can assist their African sisters and brothers on an ongoing basis in ways that might not be obvious." She adds that "While Friends' original efforts in Kenya were made in a time of colonialist expansion and paternalism, pressing human and spiritual needs were addressed there. We have before us an opportunity to help enlarge that ministry, and in the process to bring together: Black and white Friends; Poor and Affluent Friends; Programmed and Unprogrammed Friends--in a work of love and mutual enrichment." She left for Kenya directly from the FGC Gathering.

I am acquainted with Janet Roache, and had talked with her before about her concern for the needs of Third World women. That this way of acting on her concern is of the Lord's work, both for Elgon and for Friends here, seems evident. Moreover, this is Quaker activism in the classical mode: a concerned and knowledgeable individual initiative which combines mission, service and the building of unity among Friends. I find it hard to praise it highly enough. It is a large and audacious undertaking for one person, but that is what the greatest Friends were noted for, and Janet should be a good one to continue this tradition.

Likewise in the classic tradition of the Friends ministry, Roache has set out to raise the several thousand dollars this journey will cost on her own. By the time she left on 7/6

she had raised some of it, but more was needed, not only for the trip itself but also to make possible the sharing of her report with Friends in the US after her return. Atlanta Meeting has established a fund for contributions to support this mission (Roache Fund, Atlanta Friends Meeting, 1384 Fairview Rd. NE, Atlanta GA 30306.) I commend it to Friends' attention.

Still More Good News, From Africa

In Kenya, after years of strife and false starts, the three YMs there have actually done it: they have formed an inter-YM council to manage their affairs of mutual interest. Called officially the Friends Church in Kenya (FCK), the body was officially chartered by the Kenya government on 5/22/1986. Under the terms of its charter, FCK is to have authority over the creation of any new Kenyan YMs. As we have reported here frequently before (Cf. AFLs #4, #9, #16, #32, #39 & #48), Kenyan Quaker affairs have in recent years been marked by continuing internal turmoil, apparently centered in struggles for power and position within their structures. Details of the FCK's operations still remain to be worked out, but its legal recognition clearly is a giant step forward. Reportedly the leaders of all three of the existing YMs are active supporters of CK, including Thomas Lung'aho, the longtime executive secretary of East Africa YM Central, the original Kenyan YM.

Does this mean that internal conflicts among Kenyan Friends are over? Not quite. There are at least two splinter groups which reject the legitimacy of the FCK; one group, led by a disgruntled former clerk of the original East Africa YM, is seeking to have FCK and its three member YMs de-registered and dissolved; another is attempting to win independent YM status for itself, outside of FCK. While these groups are small, their capacity for causing trouble for FCK is not yet known. On a more positive note, a group of meetings in several of the larger cities, including Nairobi, is discussing the possibility of becoming a fourth YM within the FCK circle, perhaps by year's end. We'll keep watching that space!

Back At Home, Conflicts Over Homosexuality Continue

In Issue #55 (10/1985) we reported that Nebraska YM had appointed Ron Mattson, a longtime member and an openly gay man, as clerk. Nebraska met again early last month, but was faced with strong challenges to Mattson's reappointment as clerk from two of its meetings, University in Wichita and Council House in Oklahoma. These two meetings are dually affiliated with both Nebraska and Mid-America YMs; Mid-America is part of the Evangelical Friends Alliance. There was no criticism of Mattson's performance as clerk; rather, spokespeople from these two meetings said that having an open gay person in a leadership role was not acceptable according to their understanding of the Bible, and called for his replacement. The outcome was in two parts, one predictable and the other not: Predictably, Mattson was not reappointed, as there was no unity in support of that proposal. But then the YM went on to agree not to name a replacement, and closed the session **without appointing any clerk at all.** Nebraska thus becomes the first YM that I am aware of to be operating officially and deliberately without a clerk. The YM's final minute admitted that "This has not been an easy session. We have struggled. We have cried. We have been pulled and have felt drawn apart." But they reaffirmed that "God's love still reaches and undergirds us." Ron Mattson, now ex-clerk, apparently agrees with this concluding sentiment: he said recently that he is looking forward to attending the Nebraska YM sessions next year.

Struggles of this unhappy sort are not confined to midwestern, programmed meetings. Also in issue #55 we noted that a Baltimore meeting, Homewood, had conducted a ceremony of commitment for a gay male couple. At another Baltimore meeting, however, Stony Run, a very different story has unfolded. Last fall, a minute supporting the idea of same-sex commitments was raised at Stony Run; but the proposal evoked strong division, and after being labored over in three monthly meetings was finally laid aside last Third Month. Many hard feelings remain, and some members have felt personally repudiated by the action. Stony Run has now asked for help with this situation from Baltimore YM, which meets in a few weeks.

These two meetings are on the same street, a mile or so apart. Homewood was once the seat of the Orthodox Baltimore YM, part of what is now FUM, and was thought of--not inaccurately--as a theologically somewhat conservative body. Stony Run was then the seat of the Hicksite Baltimore YM, a pillar of FGC, a meeting thought of--not inaccurately--as more liberal. But among Friends it seems historical stereotypes aren't always reliable predictors of future developments--in Maryland any more than in Nebraska. But that's what makes this job interesting.

REFLECTIONS ON A KIDNEY STONE

With a kidney stone, many have told me in the last month, one is in the big leagues of pain. Indeed, the conventional medical wisdom seems to be that kidney stone pain is the benchmark against which other pain is measured; and this judgment get no challenge from me. For it was at this beginning, bottom-line issue of pain that I found myself confronting the first of many prideful illusions. Shortly after the doctor told me what was wrong, a nurse came in and told me she could offer me a shot of demerol or even morphine for my pain.

She was speaking solicitously, showing concern for my condition. But I was insulted. Demerol? You've got to be kidding. And Morphine? That stuff is poison. That stuff is dope. And I don't take dope; not me. (Oh sure, a little dabbling back in the sixties, but that was then; this is now. And now I give away bumperstickers that tell people to "Say No to Drugs, Alcohol & Tobacco!") *Get that stuff away from me.*

Maybe she had run into such self-righteousness before, because she didn't insist, but she didn't go away either. And soon enough, I was taking the dope, yea even the hated morphine, every three hours, and watching the clock like any junkie for when the next dose was about to come due. The pain settled that question.

Needles, Needles, Always More Needles

Right behind the first nurse came a second, more cheerful and thus more unappealing one, announcing that she was ready to put an IV into my wrist, adding proudly that "I give a great IV!" Oh, do you? I thought. And just what, I asked aloud, do I need one of those for? To me an IV is not unlike the Book of Revelation's Mark of the Beast: it's something you have to drag around with you wherever you go, even to the bathroom; it makes movement slow and hazardous; it's a device that turns you into a certified "patient."

The nurse explained that an IV could keep me hydrated, which was important in kidney stone situations. Soon the needle was embedded and taped on, in fine style as promised, I guess. And she was, of course, right: I did need it, as I hardly ate or drank anything for the next three days. But I was right also; once the IV was installed, I became a patient, shuffling along like others in a shapeless hospital gown, one hand grasping the everpresent pole with the solution bottle; and it was even worse later when they added an electronic monitor which beeped loudly and flashed red lights whenever the flow was disrupted, as it seemed to be every few minutes, especially at night and enroute to the bathroom.

Violating the Sanctum Sanctorum

In short, the pain left me completely weakened; and all the hospital paraphernalia devoted to coping with pain only underlined this weakness. And it was this condition of weakness and helplessness which was most humiliating to me. Because, I now realized only too clearly, I had taken great pride in my physical health, which meant freedom from such pain, such weakness, such **dependency**. There were many aspects of it: I had not been in a hospital for a "real" illness since childhood; my blood pressure was normal; as mentioned, I noisily eschewed drugs, alcohol and tobacco; I was careful about nutrition, ate lots of fiber and had regular bowels; and for that matter, by dietary changes alone I had lost fifteen pounds in the previous several months. I did this, moreover, without becoming a jogger. I was even proud of how long I could go between trips to the bathroom--although insufficient urine production, I now learned, is the number one risk factor for developing kidney stones.

Ah yes, I learned, the list of things about my body of which I was proud was almost endless. And the word **pride** is used deliberately here, in its theological sense, as the chief of the seven deadly sins. That's because I was coming to see that in all these items, it was the sense of control they yielded which was most important. "See what I have done?" said the body language, "I am in charge here; not nature, not God; **me**." An illusion, of course, which could be snatched away at any moment, as it had been from me. But a deeply-rooted illusion. As the days went on it seemed that practically all the items on my pride list were shown to be without substance. For withal, there I lay, doped up, hurting and needing constant care. Even my previously reliable bowels shut down completely.

A urologist came in to talk about treatment. The stone was too big to pass, he said. He might be able to push it back up into the kidney, and relieve the pain; but if not, the

usual mode of treatment was surgical removal. With my stone it would be major surgery; this would mean being laid up all summer, unable to work. (Panic at that: in my current job status at the Post Office I get no sick leave--no work, no pay; as it was, I ended up losing four weeks' pay anyway.) Was the urologist really anxious to use his scalpel on me and collect a big surgical fee, or was I just in a state of drug-and-pain induced paranoia? Anyway, I distrusted him; and hadn't I heard of some new treatment for stones, sound waves or something which smashed them up without surgery? Ah yes, he affirmed: You mean Extra-corporeal Shock Wave Lithotripsy (or ESWL). It would work; but in the Washington area only the Georgetown University Hospital had the equipment. This meant being transferred, and fitted into their schedule. Make the arrangements, I insisted, declining to let him get his hands on me.

And so it happened that on Friday the 13th, I underwent ESWL, in a million-dollar bathtub rigged up with a big spark plug and X-ray devices which aim the shock waves directly at the stone. The shock waves reduce the stone to sand, which usually then drains out, giving immediate relief. It's expensive (almost \$8000 in total), but ESWL beats surgery all hollow: Most patients are up and about the next day, and back at deskwork a day or two later.

As Usual, The Exception to the Rule

But not me. Instead of relief, the next day I was in even more pain; the stone debris had somehow formed a plug in my ureter and was just sitting there. Why? Nobody knew. The next three days were undoubtedly the worst: the pain was intense, but on Saturday the doctors, following normal routine, proscribed the dope and allowed me only two tylenol every four hours. By that night, my bladder was becoming distended and they inserted a catheter.

Of all the things I feared might be done to me, this, along with an enema, was at the top of the list. These most private orifices had never been so invaded before. Yet it seemed that in the course of this week my worst fears were to be realized. The catheter was indeed unpleasant, and I was very grateful when they removed it the next day. They also upgraded my medication a notch, to Percocet; but it left me in a state somewhere between delirium and hallucinations. By Monday, after many painful X-rays, the chief urologist decided I should be scheduled for the operating room first thing Tuesday morning for a cystoscopy, which was not unlike being reamed out with a plumber's snake. That, he reasoned, should get the debris out. I signed the consent form; anything to get some relief. The urologist also allowed me morphine that night, and the first shot came about 6 PM.

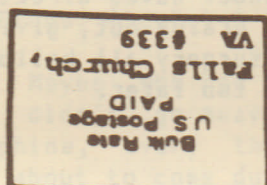
No Such Thing As Coincidence

At this point, several things happened which I believe were crucial, and interrelated: after the urologist left, I turned to my wife, who had been a stalwart support throughout these days, broke down and wept for what seemed like half an hour, spilling out, giving voice to all the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness that had been accumulating, especially since the ESWL hadn't brought relief. A little later the nurse came in and administered an enema, perhaps the last item on my fear list. Compared to the catheter it was nothing, but how did I know? Then my rebellious bowels, which had been dormant for a week, ignoring repeated doses of laxatives, finally moved. And at the same time, though I did not know until later, a recently formed meditation-healing group at our Langley Hill Meeting had gathered for its regular session, and had dedicated its efforts on my behalf. About this time I passed some urine that looked like prune juice; and a little later, just as the time for the next morphine shot was approaching, I suddenly realized that under the fading dope fuzz, oh God, the pain was gone! I skipped the next shot--after all, I'm not really a junkie--and the next, waiting to see if the pain returned. It didn't. By dawn I canceled the trip to the OR, and came home the following morning.

As awful as this experience was, I don't doubt that it had a purpose. I hesitate to try to pin it down, as new implications continue to unfold. But the encounter with my own form of body-pride was profound. It also cured me of a kind of willful ignorance about the reality and solitude of physical suffering, giving me new eyes to see the suffering of others, and I hope a deeper sense of compassion for them. And not least, it was a rare opportunity to give up my macho excuses and accept the support, love and prayers of others, friends, Friends, family members and spouse, who were there when I cried out for help, and I did. These are elementary lessons, the ABC as it were of humility; but I am mostly functionally illiterate in such things, so it is not a surprise that the initial lesson plan for me was a demanding one. Will you pray that I won't forget the lesson, or the Teacher?

POSTMASTER: Time-dated newsletter. Do not delay.

INSIDE: SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE--
REFLECTIONS ON A KIDNEY STONE, and
A MIDSUMMER QUAKER NEWS ROUNDUP



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

Maybe it's because it is summer, but these two months have been a time when many Quakers set off on exciting and improbable missions: It was on 6/8, 1772, for instance, that John Woolman arrived in London to visit among British Friends, only to be snubbed by the Ministers and Elders, doubtless because of his outlandish appearance, mainly his undyed, homespun clothing. The ministers later repented of their treatment of this visitor, who then toured the country on foot, until he was fatally stricken with smallpox a few months later. Or take Daniel Wheeler, a Quaker missionary who with his family set off from England for Russia on 6/26/1818. There Wheeler undertook to drain the swamps around St. Petersburg for the Czar, a work which continued for fifteen years. And on 6/17/1675, in Rhode Island, Friend John Easton rowed up into the wilderness to meet with the Indian chief known as King Philip, who was about to launch New England's bloodiest Indian war. Easton pleaded with Philip to seek arbitration of his differences rather than war. Easton's mission failed; but so did Philip's uprising, which ended in his death.

In Seventh Month, 1656, the first two known Quakers to reach America arrived in Boston harbor aboard a ship named the Swallow. They were two women, Ann Austin and Mary Fisher; but they didn't get very far, since the Puritan authorities sent them right back to England. Also in this month, British Friend John Bright first entered Parliament, without taking an oath. He served there almost continuously for over forty years, bearing an often lonely witness against imperialist wars and for political justice for the British working classes.

QUAKER CHUCKLES

A Friend was sitting in a meeting held especially for younger members, with his four-year old son on his lap. After several adults and children had risen to speak, the boy apparently felt a leading also. He rose and said, "God is..." then trailed off. A moment later he tried again: "God is..." and lapsed again into silence, this time until the end of meeting. He then whispered in his father's ear, "Dad, I'm sorry I don't know what God is, but I'm really going to try."

A mother who is listed in the Friends travel guide said that after several Friends came through her household, her children had a definite culinary impression of Quakers. When they saw on the calendar that a Friend was coming they could be heard to lament, "Oh no, it'll be brussel sprouts, broccoli and wheat germ again!"

--With thanks to Mark Judkins Friend and Northern Yearly Meeting
