

# A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Sixty-Five

ISSN #0739-5418

Eighth Month, 1986

Dear Friend,

First, a big goof must be acknowledged. The last issue, Seventh Month, 1986, was numbered as Issue #64. But a review of computer disk file which listed an Issue #63, turned up only an abandoned two-line beginning of a draft for Seventh Month. So if you are keeping a file (*librarians take note!*) the sequence by months is correct, but there is NO Issue #63. For convenience, this issue is #65.

Next, another acknowledgement is due, to the numerous readers who have written tender and supportive letters in response to that misnumbered issue's piece on my kidney stone ordeal earlier this summer. I continue to reflect on that experience and learn from it, and your responses are a valuable addition to that process.

Finally, a Friendly comment on another publication: On the back cover of the *Evangelical Friend's* 7-8/86 issue is a feature entitled "Declaring Our Mission," by Charles Mylander, Superintendent of California Yearly Meeting. The piece begins, in large italics, by noting that "*In 1987 the International Friends Conference on evangelism will meet in Guatemala City.*" It adds that "*One hundred years earlier, Friends produced the historic Richmond Declaration of Faith.*" Then it states: "*In 1887 Friends stated their beliefs. In 1987 Friends will declare their mission.*"

These latter three statements troubled me. It would have been more accurate and fair, I think, for the article to have said that in 1887 *SOME* Friends stated their beliefs, and that in 1987 *SOME* Friends will declare their mission. Is this nitpicking? I do not think so. As Friend Mylander well knows, the Richmond Declaration has divided Friends since it was written, by a group representing only one self-selected segment of existing Quakerism. (And it is still dividing them today: Recently I learned of plans for an ecumenical gathering of Quaker groups in a western state which were suspended when one invited group declined to participate unless all others invited subscribed to the Declaration.) And for that matter, the 1987 conference on evangelism is expecting only 300 delegates, and will focus on an approach to church expansion that has long been highly controversial among some Friends as well as some other religious denominations. That these qualifications were also overlooked by the magazine's editors is also troubling. Accuracy and fairness in such disputed matters are important, both for discussions within Quaker groups as well as between them--especially those conducted in widely-circulated Quaker journals.

Yours in the Light,

*Chuck Fager*

Chuck Fager



## DAVID AND GOLIATH IN INDIANA YEARLY MEETING

David Brock, the new Superintendent of Indiana Yearly Meeting, is an energetic and dedicated man. That's good; he will need all his energy and dedication in this new job, plus a large chunk of good luck, if he is to succeed. That's because Indiana Yearly Meeting is in trouble. Big trouble. The evidence for this estimate is not hard to find or itemize:

- \* Membership is declining at a precipitous rate--12 per cent in the past four years, a loss of over a thousand out of 8500 at the end of 1982.

- \* With the drop in numbers have come increasing financial strains, and loud outcries of protest from local Meetings chafing at an ever-higher YM assessment.

- \* There has also been protracted internal squabbling, over a variety of issues and divergent theological and cultural perspectives, with consequent factionalism as bad as anything Paul decried in his letters to the Corinthians.

- \* This factionalism has on more than one recent occasion led to YM intervention in local meeting affairs.

- \* Morale among many Indiana Friends has been low, especially concerning the YM.

This is a sad litany to hear about a group that, perhaps more than any other, represents the heartland of American Quakerism. Indiana not only has a proud history as a YM, but it also is home, in Richmond, to one of the world's great Quaker centers: the seat of Friends United Meeting, the Earlham School of Religion and the Quaker Hill Conference Center, not to mention many senior, weighty individual Friends. Yet there is simply no denying the seriousness of Indiana's problems, or the difficulty of finding realistic solutions.

### *A Search for Understanding Without Scapegoats*

Take membership, for example. Like many states with large farming populations, Indiana has been hit hard by the farm crisis, and it had long been losing rural population even before the latest disasters hit. Yet many small Indiana meetings are located deep in rural areas that are now all but depopulated; small wonder their membership is down.

Or consider the theological/cultural conflicts: In 1984, for instance, during the YM sessions at Earlham College, there was great outcry against what some saw as manifold evidence of rampant iniquity there: Playboy magazine on sale in the bookstore; both a gay rights group and smoking permitted on the campus; coed dorms; even, it was alleged, some coed bathrooms; and few signs of the kind of Christian atmosphere some felt ought to characterize a college which Indiana YM helped support. There was talk of moving the YM sessions to some other, more evangelically-oriented college; there was talk of cutting the YM's ties to Earlham. The weighty Friends were alarmed enough that a special reconciliation committee was formed to patch things up. Yet, reading the account of this controversy, one might well agree with Koheleth the Preacher that there is nothing new under the sun; such town-and-gown conflicts have flared up periodically between Indiana Friends and their fine college since before the turn of this century. And for at least as long, Indiana YM has encompassed Meetings and pastors for whom revivalist fundamentalism was the sum of religion, mainstream Protestant types of the social gospel variety, and even strongly liberal, cosmopolitan Friends. To say there has long been tension among them is an understatement.

### *Making Things Worse, Or Making Things Better?*

In some recent years, however, the intensity of these conflicts has occasionally gotten out of hand. Two incidents in the early 1980s are indicative of this: in one, a pastor with a non-Quaker background at Walnut Ridge Meeting brought in a baptism and a communion table, and began practicing what are known in those parts as "the ordinances," to the alarm of traditional-minded Friends in the area. This is a sensitive matter in Indiana, because across the border in Ohio, the Evangelical Friends Church-Eastern Region has officially allowed such ceremonies in several of its churches for a century; but despite its strong pastoral-evangelical associations, here Indiana has steadfastly drawn the line. The situation came to a head when three YM officials, including the late clerk Richard Newby, appeared at Walnut Ridge for a business meeting, and succeeded in having the pastor sacked on



the spot. To some, this intervention was a heroic, Grenada-like rescue mission; but there are others who wonder whether it didn't largely destroy the meeting in order to save it.

The other incident (described at some length in our Issue #15), involved the pastor of the West Elkton Meeting. An open lesbian couple had been attending there, and the pastor, Ken Story, had testified on behalf of one of the women in a child custody trial. Under cross-examination by the estranged husband's attorney, he had admitted that he did not think homosexuality itself was evil. This statement led to efforts by numerous weighty Indiana Friends to have Story fired and his ministerial recording rescinded. But the West Elkton Meeting rallied behind him and turned these efforts firmly aside. Story later left on his own to pursue a counselling career; the couple was later accepted into membership; but the YM that summer was confronted by a hastily-drafted minute condemning homosexuality, which drew both vociferous backing and opposition, yet was nonetheless pronounced adopted by the Clerk.

The memory of these incidents was vivid in the minds of some Friends last year when Indiana considered revisions to its book of *Faith and Practice*, as also was the experience of Friends in adjoining Western YM with a rebel group in Hinkle Creek Meeting. That fight ended up in the Indiana Supreme Court (as summarized in our Issue #20), and the Yearly Meeting ultimately won. One proposed section described monthly meetings as "subordinate" to the YM, specifically in order to provide a legal basis for it to prevail in any such situation in its territory. But Spiceland Meeting sent up a strongly worded dissent from the proposal, insisting that Spiceland was and would not be "subordinate" to any earthly body. This opposition was enough to stall the revision for a year.

### *A Search For New Leadership*

These currents, membership decline, financial shortfalls, factional infighting and low morale, have seemed in recent years to flow together into a kind of Gordian knot, which no one knew how to untangle. But in the spring of 1985, when Indiana's longtime Superintendent, Sherman Brantingham, became ill, the possibility that new leadership might help came open. Brantingham had already announced plans to retire, but his illness hastened the beginning of a search for a successor. The search committee looked long and hard; it was not until this spring that they announced their choice: David Brock, the pastor of Friends Community Church of Bakersfield, California.

Brock was an intriguing choice: He is relatively young at 39, not from Indiana and not, indeed, a longtime Friend. But he had a track record as a church builder, developing the Bakersfield church from a small Bible class to a 200-plus member going concern in only a few years. And he also was reputed to be interested in maintaining a Friends identity in his church, something that many more theologically conservative leaders in California YM would just as soon submerge into the greater evangelical enterprise.

Brock hit the ground running in Indiana; at the 1986 sessions, his presence, as a sign of new leadership and thus hope, may have contributed to their relative calm. The disputed section of the *Faith and Practice* was accepted; the YM budget was cut, painfully but reportedly without acrimony; and when a small group wanted to bring the abortion issue to the floor, they were deflected into an orderly discussion group, which yielded an innocuous minute urging further study and discussion. Brock challenged the YM to learn to accept and affirm its diversity; he also challenged the pastors to set a goal of a ten percent increase in attendance in the coming year. He insists he will not run from conflicts but wants to see Indiana Friends learn to get along better with each other as they handle conflicts; and he says his first goal is to help rebuild Indiana Quakers' morale and self-esteem.

### *Questions That Remain--Above All, Can He Do It?*

Brock admits he is still in the honeymoon period as Superintendent. But there are many questions about the YM's future, and his prospects as its executive, hovering in the air. Will his California church-growth experience, in a state where everything was growing and a Friends church was a new idea, really be transferable to Indiana, a declining state in which an old, established Quaker institution has similarly been in a long decline? And is the factionalism which so dogs the YM simply a matter of strong egos, or is it more institutional, more rooted in the YM's long and colorful history? Can Brock really escape getting caught up in it, and identified with one faction or another, as some of his predecessors have? Can he, or any one person, bring Indiana YM back from the brink? David Brock and Indiana YM face a daunting task, but an important one, and we wish them well. him well in the attempt; it is a worthy enterprise.



Some Friends may recall that this year's winner of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry was Henry Taylor, a professor of literature at American University in Washington. Fewer Friends will know that Henry Taylor is a Quaker; I did not when I first heard him read his work on a local radio show. But something about the artful directness of his poems and the plainness with which he spoke was very striking, so that by the end of the interview I strongly suspected that this man was a Friend, a suspicion that was confirmed by his answer to a caller's question. And in fact, he is not just a member, but clerk of Goose Creek Meeting in Lincoln Virginia, where in the last two centuries three of his grandfathers, at least two of them likewise named Henry, have also served as clerk.

Taylor spoke at Baltimore YM earlier this month, and read several of his poems. Four of his poems are included below, along with excerpts from his talk.

On being a "Quaker poet": "I have avoided linking 'poet' and 'Friend' in any adjective-noun combination because, to me, terms like 'Quaker poet' suggest kinds of work that I rarely do. As a writer, I suppose I have been more keenly aware of my Southern heritage than my Quaker heritage, though the tensions inherent in being a Southern Quaker have been rewarding, since the values and attitudes of Quakerism have sometimes been at odds with the values and attitudes that shaped most of the rural South. So I have what seems to me a usefully schizophrenic reaction to such things as tradition, ceremony, form and change....What, then, can I say here about the many poems of mine which seem to have little to do with Friendly concerns? Only that my first adult encounter with what was then called *The Book of Discipline* was a reassuring and confirming experience. I have valued the humor that turns up even in the gravest of circumstances, and, by including it in essentially serious poems, I have tried to see the world more fully, more seriously, than pure solemnity usually can. I have tried to avoid being fancy even when some subtlety was unavoidable; in a state of patiently active waiting, I have been a seeker for the phrasing, and the world view, that would seem truest and most nearly unrevisable."

## RIDING LESSON

I learned two things  
from an early riding teacher.  
He held a nervous filly  
in one hand and gestured  
with the other, saying, "Listen.  
Keep one leg on one side,  
the other leg on the other side,  
and your mind in the middle."

He turned and mounted.  
She took two steps, then left  
the ground, I thought for good.  
But she came down hard, humped  
her back, swallowed her neck,  
and threw her rider as you'd  
throw a rock. He rose, brushed  
his pants and caught his breath,  
and said, "See that's the way  
to do it. When you see  
they're gonna throw you, get off."

## BERNARD AND SARAH

(Ed. note: The Bernard in this poem  
was one of the previous Taylor clerks of  
Goose Creek Meeting.)

"Hang them where they'll do some good," my grandfather  
said, as he placed the dusty photograph  
in my father's hands. My father and I stared  
at two old people posed stiffly side by side--  
my great-great-great-grandparents, in the days  
when photography was young, and they were not.  
My father thought it out as we drove home.

Deciding that they might do the most good  
somewhere out of sight, my father drove  
a nail into the back wall of his closet;  
they have hung there ever since, brought out  
only on such occasions as the marriage  
of one of his own children. "I think you ought  
to know the stock you're joining with," he says.

Then back they go to the closet, where they hang  
keeping their counsel until it is called for.  
Yet, through walls, over miles of fields and woods  
that flourish still around the farm they cleared,  
their eyes light up the closet of my brain  
to draw me toward the place I started from,  
and when I have come home, they take me in.



Of the following poems, Taylor has said "the first is one version of a late adolescent break with the family faith; the second is an account of the discovery that that faith mattered to someone a little older--though not as old as I am now."

#### GOODBYE TO THE OLD FRIENDS

Because of a promise I cannot break  
I have returned to my father's house,  
and here,  
for the first time in years, I have risen  
early this Sunday to visit the Friends.  
As I drive to the Meeting House, the trees  
wave softly as the wind moves over me.  
I am late. Faces turn to look at me;  
I sit in a bench apart, and silence breaks  
slightly, like the rustle of old trees.  
I wonder whether I am welcome here,  
but in the old wall clock I see a friend.  
An old man I remember now has risen  
to say that this is Easter. Christ has risen.  
The ticking of this old wall clock  
distracts me  
as this old man addresses his friends;  
he prowls for an hour through a Bible, breaks  
his voice to bring my wandering mind back here  
from aimless circling through the aging trees  
whose branches tick like clocks. Boughs cut  
from trees,  
disposed through the room, remind me of the  
risen  
Christ this voice speaks of; I do not see  
him here.  
I do not see him here, but flowers tell me,  
on the mantel before us, in scent that breaks  
above the graying heads of nodding Friends,  
on hats and in lapels of aging Friends,  
the flowers and the branches from the trees  
remind me of what this old man's voice breaks  
for the last time to tell us: Christ has  
risen.  
with the tongue of a man he speaks to me  
and to his Friends; there are no angels here.  
At last I shout without breath my first prayer  
here  
and ask for nothing but silence. Two old  
Friends  
turn slowly toward each other, letting me  
know how much silence remains. The trees  
ripple the silence, and the spirit has risen.  
Two old hands of marble meet and Meeting  
breaks.  
Old Friends move over the lawn, among old  
trees.  
One offers me his hand. I have risen,  
I am thinking, as I break away from here.

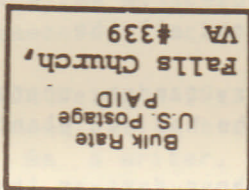
#### RETURN TO THE OLD FRIENDS

This Meeting House, rising from a rejoicing  
April landscape, is emptied of all music,  
though sunlight glances brightly from the  
crimson  
flowers by the road. We feel the hollow clash  
of mystery at this liveliness, opposing  
the final smallness of our hopes that peace  
may be with him forever, whose life was peace.  
My grandfather is here, beyond all the  
rejoicing  
he carried into his legendary garden, opposing  
the encroachment of things he had not planted,  
music  
rising from around him in those days as the  
clash  
of hoe on stone struck sparks of crimson  
until the whole garden seemed stained crimson  
with his foes' blood. Yet by his labor, peace  
flourished in his garden, until, as at a clash  
of cymbals, we find him, far from all  
rejoicing;  
we walk to our seats as to a solemn music.  
Years have gone by since I left here, opposing  
all that this house gave me while opposing  
mysteries called me to other places, crimson  
pageantries these Friends distrust. What music,  
did I look for when I left this house of peace  
shaking certain hands for the last time,  
rejoicing  
in what I thought my victory in the old clash  
with all that fathered me? I relive that  
clash,  
trying to recall the force I was opposing  
in my father's calm eyes as I fled rejoicing.  
Now it is Easter, spring is green and crimson,  
yet his father lies here. I come in peace  
to greet old Friends once more, in search of  
music  
that deserted me at my departure, music  
free of pageantry or sound, without the clash  
of bells that signal anything but peace.  
My grandfather lies still as stone, opposing  
my wish for breath below the touch of crimson,  
yet in his presence now I stand rejoicing.  
This silent music in my blood, opposing  
the clash of sunlight dancing on crimson,  
leads me toward peace and a strange rejoicing.



POSTMASTER: Time-dated newsletter. Do not delay.

INSIDE: INDIANA YEARLY MEETING IN CRISIS  
AND A SPECIAL POETRY SUPPLEMENT



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

---

### *This Month In Quaker History*

It was in Eighth Month, 1920, that the last British objectors to conscription in World War One were released from English prisons, almost two years after the war had ended. By law, such objectors were supposed to be exempt from wartime conscription. But in fact, many were ordered drafted by local tribunals, and jailed when they refused. Their treatment by military officials was frequently brutal. In 1916 army authorities covertly shipped a boatload of absolutist objectors to the war zone in France, where they could be executed under military law for refusing to fight. Thirty-four of them were sentenced to death, but were saved when Liberal members of Parliament exposed the scheme. There were fatalities among the prisoners, however. Among those in prison, who numbered around 1700 at war's end, were many Friends. A good many more managed to obtain non-combatant alternative work, often under prison-like conditions. Historian Peter Brock estimates that as many as two-thirds of draft age British Quakers took a conscientious objector position during this war.

### *Quaker Chuckles*

Four days before an election, a certain politician was out canvassing for votes. "I hope I'll have your support," he said to a farmer in a broadbrimmed hat. "I'm afraid thee won't," the farmer said. "I've already promised my support to thy opponent."

The politician smiled and said, "In politics, friend, promising and doing are two different things."

"Well in that case, Friend," said the farmer, "I'll be happy to give thee my promise."

Another Quaker farmer, who operates a moderate-sized apple orchard in Pennsylvania, was recently visited by a Texas cattleman who had hit oil and put his profits into more land. The Texan asked how big the Quaker's property was. "Tolerably large," said the farmer, pointing to a fence to the north, a creek to the south, and roads to the east and west, all in clear view. "And how big is thy ranch, Friend?" he inquired.

"Well, partner," said the Texan, "let me tell you. If I get up real early in the morning, and climb into my old pickup and drive hard all day, I can just about make it to the other end of my property."

The farmer thought a moment and then nodded gravely, "Yes," he allowed, "I had a pickup like that once too."

---