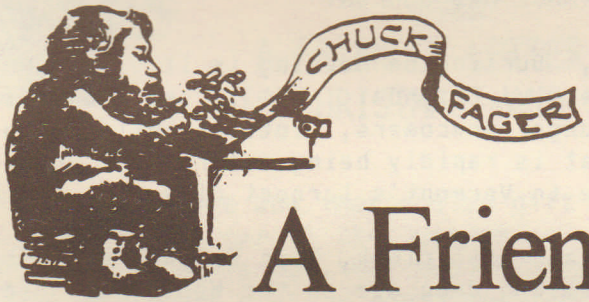

A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Sixty-Seven ISSN #0739-5418 Tenth Month, 1986

Dear Friend,

I admit I never thought it would happen, but it did: A Friendly Letter was scooped by Friends Journal. Right there in the 10/15 issue, big as life, is an article on a group in Maine calling themselves the Friends of Jesus Christ. It was my intention that you would read about these folks first in these pages; ever since hearing of them last summer, I had been planning to travel to Maine, take a good look at them, and report my findings here. But in a telephone conversation with the group's founder came the startling news that the Journal already had a piece in the works, which would be out before my report could be.

So a tip of the broadbrim is in order to Journal Editor Vint Deming, and to Lisa Kuenning, who wrote the piece; they beat me fair and square. (And I have warned my editor that if it happens again, he's fired....)Fortunately for me, though, Quakers in New England are up to lots of other interesting things, so I was able to get up that way this month after all, with results that are described inside. And special thanks are due to the Quaker Leadership Development Fund of my own Langley Hill Meeting, which helped make the journey possible. It has meant more to me than can be expressed here.

Thanks are also due to the many readers who have responded to my request in the last issue for advice about expanding this letter to six pages. Comments are still coming in, but thus far they break down into three groups: the largest number would keep the four-page format, to avoid the getting-lost-in-the-stack-of-things-I-should-read problem; but a sizeable minority says, go ahead, make it six or even eight pages, we'll pay more if necessary. From the third group, small but weighty, I hear simply: make it as long as it needs to be.

My own feeling at this point is a combination of the first and third: keeping it short is important; all of you have more than enough to read already. But there will be times when four pages just won't be enough. And in any case I will do my best to keep the cost down. One way to do this is through the inclusion of various sales flyers in the issues; there have been a few complaints about these, but the little income they bring in is important to keeping this letter afloat, so I must ask their forebearance.

And in that regard, let me mention that it is again the season to think about gift subscriptions. They are available this year for $12 apiece, and we will send a gift card out by Christmas if we receive your orders by Twelth Month 19. A larger subscription list will also help hold down the the per-issue production cost, and hence subscription rates.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

BARR BEHIND BARS: RESISTANCE AND SUPPORT

Except for the fact that its clerk is in jail, Burlington Meeting is like many other groups that make you feel optimistic about the Society of Friends: It is small but lively, with a good mix of older seasoned Friends and younger newcomers, lots of children and an active First Day School, all in a meetinghouse that is rapidly being outgrown. Burlington Friends also dream of building a Quaker center there in Vermont's largest city.

But if Burlington Meeting is in many ways typical, its clerk, Barr Swennerfelt, is not. Her background includes a troubled youth, hippiedom and drug use on the West Coast in the sixties, then welfare and single parenting in Boston. This was followed by graduate school in business and notable success in the financial world in the early 1980s. Parallel to and underlying this outward experience was an inner quest which led her to Quakerism and through it to a sense of calling to a life of resistance. These paths came to a fateful crossroads in 1985 when, after she had been arrested several times for peaceful civil disobedience at a General Electric plant in Burlington which makes a particularly destructive high-tech machine gun used, among other places, in El Salvador. At that time Barr was Burlington's Assistant City Treasurer under its socialist mayor, Bernie Sanders. Sanders asked her to quit getting arrested; instead, she left her job. Learning to live on a third of her former income has been a milestone in her own pilgrimage; as, also, is the ninety-day sentence she was serving in the Chittenden Community Correctional Center when this was written.

Facing Up To Doing Time

As she tells the story, it doesn't sound as if Barr expected to end up doing 90 days when she and another person climbed the GE plant's fence last Good Friday, planted crosses bearing the names of Central American victims of the GE machine gun, and knelt to pray. Her earlier arrests had resulted in light or suspended sentences, and, in one well-known case, acquittal on the basis of what is called the "necessity defense": that breaking the law peacefully was necessary to prevent the greater evil of U.S.-sponsored violence in Central America. For that matter, in this latest case, the judge was still not anxious to lock her up: his original sentence was to 40 hours of community service and a $500 fine. But Barr felt the probation restrictions were too confining and declined to accept them; and jail was the alternative. She entered the Chittenden Community Correctional Center in Burlington in early Ninth Month, after losing an sappeal to the judge for a reduction in sentence.

As such places go, the Chittenden Center is not bad; it is a relatively new red-brick structure, whose superintendent expresses enlightened views on penological issues; there is not much violence. But like most prisons, it is overcrowded, and as practically any former inmate can testify, a jail is a jail. Imprisonment for any length of time is a destructive experience, not only for the inmates but for their families as well; it is particularly hard on marriages.

Gaining Support--The Crucial Ingredient

Under these circumstances, it comes as no surprise that corrections research shows that those prisoners survive it best who have the most support from outside, both for themselves and their families. Prisoners of conscience are no exception to this rule. A very fine book, In The Service of Their Country, was written in the early 1970s by a psychiatrist named Willard Gaylin about the experiences of draft resisters in prison: they suffered just as much as their presumably less conscientious criminal cellmates from the effects of isolation, boredom and prison oppression--sometimes more because many of them came in from sheltered middle class backgrounds, utterly unprepared for their harsh new environment.

Barr, however, was not unaware of the challenge she faced, and turned naturally to her Quaker community for support. That support has come from several levels: New England Yearly Meeting adopted a minute of support last summer, and its fund for sufferings has been paying her rent for these three months. Attenders at the Northwest Quarterly Meeting chipped in another $150 at their autumn gathering. Burlington Friends have responded actively as well: advised by the jail officials that they could appoint a chaplain to visit Barr regularly, they responded in sound Quaker fashion that since every member was a minister, they should

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Here's a unique and inexpensive gift idea: Send *A Friendly Letter* to the Quakers on your Christmas list. Because there is no other publication like it, your thoughtfulness will be remembered each month as a new issue keeps your Friends ahead of the important news and concerns in american Quakerdom. It's easy too: just send us the names and addresses with your payment. We will send out a personalized gift announcement and begin the subscription with the First Month, 1987 issue. The special gift subscription rate of only $12 will also be easy on your holiday budget.

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A UNIQUE CHILDREN'S BOOK

Recently we received a letter from a California Friend. It said, in part:

"At Pacific Yearly Meeting I had the delightful experience of reading **The Magic Quilts** *to five children ages about seven to nine. They declared it to be 'a great story.' The boys liked it as much as the girls did."*

We've heard many similar comments from satisfied readers, and this leads us to ask, if you have a young person in this age range for whom you're seeking a unique and Friendly gift, for holiday or birthday, would you consider *The Magic Quilts*, a full-length fantasy story published by Kimo Press? Written by Chuck Fager for his own children, *The Magic Quilts* is in the tradition of Oz, Middle Earth and Narnia, but with some important differences: a strong set of female characters, and a story line centered on preventing violence rather than using it as a tool of victory. The story is an exciting one, full of magic and suspense, with a thrilling climax.

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all be on the chaplain's list. Since this was, predictably, too much for the superintendent to accept, a list of four was settled upon, who have visited and worshipped with Barr weekly. Another group of four has volunteered to escort Barr from the jail on those First Day mornings, when as a minimum security inmate she has been able to obtain much sought-after three-hour passes to attend Bible study and meeting for worship at the meetinghouse. (One of her main gratifications during these brief visits is to wolf down quantities of raw vegetables brought in potluck by other Friends; they are almost the only fresh food she gets during the week.) And from day to day, there has been a steady stream of letters, from Friends and others all over New England.

To a visitor, the value to Barr of this Quaker lifeline is immediately apparent: There have been numerous hassles inside the jail to cope with; she has teenagers and a husband at home who are confronting all the typical tensions of stepfamily life, with now the added burden of having mom, who has been the main breadwinner, behind bars; and there is the continuing challenge for her of sorting out the religious meaning of this experience.

This last is no small matter. It is evident even to an outsider that Barr's sense of the implications of this experience for her has been evolving during her time inside. In the beginning, she says she focussed much energy on the arbitrary oppressiveness of life inside the crowded jail, writing letters to state officials and local newspapers about outrageous aspects of the conditions there. But more recently, while not forgetting about these conditions, her attention has been drawn more and more toward the other women inmates, their many needs, and their general isolation in society: she has begun tutoring some of them in math, and some others in such elementary survival skills as handling a checking account. She has also joined several inmates in attending a fundamentalist Bible study group, where she has appreciated the teachers' devotion but clashed repeatedly with them over matters of theology, in particular what doctrinal formulas must be adopted in order to be "saved."

As Her Experience Changes, It Changes Her Too

By midway through her sentence she was considering seeking certification as a volunteer after her release, so she could return to the jail and do more work with individual women. She was also thinking of starting a non-fundamentalist Bible study class. It would be highly unusual, perhaps unprecedented, for an ex-inmate to be allowed to work as a volunteer, and gaining approval might well entail a de facto pledge to avoid further arrests whch she was unwilling to give her former boss, the socialist mayor. Such a shift from issue-oriented public protest to individual ministry would also be a major shift of emphasis for her.

In short, Barr's prison experience showed unmistakable signs of becoming what it ought to be, namely a further step on her deeply-felt spiritual path. Clearly the level of support she has been shown has made much of this possible. Burlington Friends have done extremely well by her, and themselves, in this situation.

An Uplifting Example, And A Source of Questions

Even so, while personally very uplifted by the example of Barr and Burlington Friends, I came away with many questions nagging at me about this matter of supporting Friends undergoing sufferings. These questions are mainly of a "What If?" character: what if, for instance, there were not one but several Burlington Friends in jail, and two or three dozen more across New England? And what if the sentences of some were not three months but three years? How far and how long could the supportive energies and resources of monthly and Yearly Meetings be expected to stretch?

Why worry about such hypothetical questions? Mainly because they don't seem to me to be all that hypothetical: These days it is not hard to imagine scenarios in which many other Meetings could find themselves faced with significant numbers of Friends in prison: Direct U.S. intervention in Central America is one; a return to the draft is another. The capacity to support members undergoing sufferings for peaceable witness ought to be part of the standard equipment of every Quaker group, just like a fire extinguisher or copies of Faith and Practice. Indeed, we faced such a situation not long ago, during the Vietnam years, and our record of support then was not nearly as good as it should have been. Will Friends be ready to meet the next such challenge when it comes, as surely it will?

POSTMASTER: Time-dated newsletter. Do not delay.

INSIDE: THE CASE OF THE INCARCERATED CLERK

From: Chuck Fager, *A Friendly Letter*
P.O. Box 1361
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This Month In Quaker History

It was in Tenth Month, 1668 that Thomas Loe, one of the first generation of Quaker missionaries, died in London. Loe was an eloquent preacher; and his ministry nowhere had more impact than in the heart of the young William Penn. Penn had first heard Loe as a boy, during Loe's visit to Penn's father's estate in Ireland in 1656. Loe's preaching then moved the entire household to tears, even the elder Admiral Penn; but to young William it became a seed of convincement which bore fruit slowly over the next decade. William's father was outraged when his son, a dashing young courtier with excellent prospects for rising high in the royal circles, threw everything away for the plain dress and often illegal conduct of the Quaker radicals. At one point, the admiral even took his son into a private room where he said he was going to pray to Almighty God that William would not become a Quaker, nor ever again attend a Quaker meeting. (William stopped him by opening a window and threatening to jump out if the prayer was spoken.) Not much later, he visited the dying Loe, who took his hand and told him "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 charge became the title of Penn's first major writing, a few months later, No Cross, No Crown. It was also the seal on a career of witness that few, Friends or others, could hope to match.

Quaker Chuckle

Once in the 1850s, an Ohio Friend was returning by train from an abolitionist convention when a group of ministers from Kentucky boarded his car. One of them, noting the Friend's plain garb and guessing his antislavery convictions, began to bait him: "Are you one of these Quakers who wants to free all the niggers?" he demanded. The Friend nodded affirmatively.

"Well then," continued the minister, "why do you preach your antislavery doctrines up here in Ohio? Why don't you come try it over in Kentucky?"

The Friend was tired and a bit cross, so he responded with a question of his own: "Is thee a preacher?"he asked. The other said he was. "And is thee trying to save souls from hell?" the Friend continued. Yes, the minister allowed, he was. "Well, then," concluded the Friend wearily, "why doesn't thee go there?"