

A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Sixty-Eight

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Eleventh Month, 1986

Dear Friend,

As often happens, I started out this month expecting to devote this issue to a topic other than the one I actually ended up writing about. Thus changing one's mind is a privilege that comes with being editor/publisher. It is also a necessity for one trying to listen to and follow the promptings of a Spirit that, like the wind, "bloweth where it listeth," as the Gospel says (John 3:8); and it likewise can play havoc with deadlines. A concern relating to Central America which has been increasingly on my mind simply crowded out the other, a report on some Quaker musicians and their work; that will come when it is ready.

One other brief report, though, should not be neglected: Our Issue #66 described the AFSC's struggle over whether to admit non-Friends who were clerks of regional executive committees to full membership on its national Board of Directors, which has previously been all-Quaker. This matter was confronted again at the annual meeting of the AFSC Corporation on 10/31. What ensued, as described by AFSC, was a "long and sensitive discussion of the issue of governance of AFSC in general and the role of regional clerks who are not members of the Society of Friends in particular....The discussion strongly reaffirmed the centrality of AFSC's Quaker character and probed the extent to which this quality requires an all-Friends Board of Directors." Apparently the tone of the discussion was much more Friendly than last year's contentious and angry debate; but the outcome was not much more definite. The Corporation decided "it was not essential" to resolve the matter this year, and agreed "to allow the consideration of this matter to season for another year." In the interim, the Corporation did change the AFSC by-laws to recognize "all regional clerks as full participants in all Board meetings," but not necessarily, for the non-Friends among them, full Board members.

In other words, as one AFSC source put it, the Corporation fudged. So what will happen next? Stay tuned; it's such drama that keeps *A Friendly Letter* in business.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

PS. Also on the topic of Central America, an interest group of Boulder Meeting in Colorado has just issued a "Border Support Network Catalog." It describes several Meeting-related and other projects which are working to meet the needs of the steady flow of refugees coming into the U.S. from Central America. Copies of the catalog are free from: Friends of Central America, P.O. Box 4363, Boulder CO 80306.

PPS. Let me gently remind readers again that this is a good time to think about gift subscriptions, for which a flyer is enclosed.

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NICARAGUA: IN SEARCH OF HARMLESS WISDOM

Last spring a young American Friend named Sarah Scattergood spent a week on a study tour of Nicaragua. Afterward she wrote home about the frustration and confusion she felt by the time the tour was over: *"We went from interview to interview, a bus load of gringos bouncing to the left and back to the right. Each interview was with a political spokesperson with an axe to grind. Each huddle of propaganda-shouters has its own brand of tunnel vision and its own motivation for lying."* To help sort out these contradictory impressions, she stayed a second week in Nicaragua, travelling on her own and talking to ordinary people one-on-one.

Even without visiting Nicaragua, I know how Friend Scattergood feels. My sense of being bounced between left and right has been increasing recently, but with no firsthand opportunity to sort out the opposing viewpoints and sift the lies from the truth. As a result, while listening to a steady stream of advocates of various Nicaragua-related projects seeking support, I have been slow to sign up with any, and want to reflect here on why. As always, I will be interested to hear how readers feel about this issue and these views.

The Easy Part and the Hard Part

While slow to get behind specific Nicaraguan support and relief efforts, this is not to say I have been silent about the war in Central America, particularly America's part in it. If understanding what is happening within Nicaragua has been hard, making a judgment about the present administration's policy, especially that of funding the Contra insurgency, has been comparatively easy: I'm very much against it. The reasons for this opposition should be familiar to Friendly readers: Quakers reject violence as a way to settle differences; and for an American, the idea of U.S. tax dollars underwriting what is in large measure a campaign of terror whose victims are primarily civilians is intolerable. More practically, even if the Sandinistas are as bad as the White House insists they are (which I doubt), they are no real threat to our national security. No, it is not difficult to feel the need to cry out against our participation in this war. That I have done, and will continue to do.

But as I said, that is the easy part. The hard part, as Sarah Scattergood found, is to develop, or support, a positive witness in relation to Nicaragua itself. A positive witness is important; it is not enough, for me as a Friend, simply to be *against* something. Quakers are called to find ways, in Penn's words, "to see what love can do." This has been hard for a number of reasons--my ignorance of Nicaragua, for one; the difficulty of getting reliable reports about events there, for another. But for me, especially in recent months, these have been steadily outweighed by still another consideration: a desire to support constructive witness in Nicaragua without thereby signing on as a supporter of, or cheerleader for, the Nicaraguan Sandinista government.

A Charge To Find Wisdom For Harmlessness

Why should this witness be independent of support for the government? My answer to that goes beyond political calculation; it involves both general spiritual reflections and specific, important memories. On the spiritual side, while mulling over this situation, and ways to bear witness within it, two Bible verses have repeatedly come to mind. The first is where Jesus tells his disciples: "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." (Matthew 10:16) Too often I have seen Friends concentrating on the second half of that charge, the harmless part, while overlooking the prior need for wisdom--and pretending there are no such things as wolves. Yet as is usually the case, there is truth in Jesus' saying: My own experience supports the conclusion that it is *not* easy to act harmlessly, or truly in support of peace and on behalf of the poor; it requires wisdom, lots of it. Indeed, if we do not take care to act wisely, our harmlessness may well end up not being harmless at all. And so the second Scripture verse I hear is Job's cry: "But where can wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?" (Job 28:12) This is where the important memories come in, memories of another war: Vietnam.

I know F/friends who are now embarrassed about, and perhaps even a little ashamed of, the degree to which their opposition to that war led them to see the Vietnamese and in some cases even the Cambodian communists as enlightened national liberators whose victory was to be celebrated. Later, some U.S. peace groups, and Quaker groups among them, long refused to



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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.

The Magic Quilts is published as a full-size, 100-page softbound book, including several original illustrations. It is available only from Kimo Press. Use the coupon below to order. We're sure it will please a young person in your life.

ORDER FORM

Please send me _____ copies of The Magic Quilts. My payment is enclosed.

One copy: \$12.00, plus \$1.00 shipping.

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ANNOUNCING A SPECIAL PROJECT: AN ORAL HISTORY OF CIVILIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

Dear Friend,

Civilian Public Service, or CPS, was how the government dealt with conscientious objectors in World War Two. Over a thousand young Quakers served in CPS camps, some for several years, at their own expense, under a wide variety of conditions and encountering many unusual adventures.

These CPS veterans became a generation of Quaker leaders. Now at retirement age, mortality is steadily diluting their ranks. Yet they have many good stories to tell of these CPS years, some funny, some exciting, some poignant, and all part of a key formative experience for those who have made American Quakerism what it is today.

I have heard some of these stories, and each one left me anxious to hear more. In fact, for some years I have had a concern to get some of the wealth of these CPS stories down in a permanent form, so this unique legacy will not be lost to succeeding generations of Friends.

Earlier this fall, my meeting, Langley Hill in McLean, Virginia, considered and endorsed this concern, and created the CPS Oral History Project under my direction. The project has several goals: to collect interviews and memorabilia from CPS veterans and their close family members; to transcribe and find a permanent home for these materials; and to produce a book of the best, most memorable CPS stories.

To carry out this work, the Project will need many kinds of help from Friends: Names and addresses of CPS alumni; volunteer interviewers and transcribers; and, of course, funds to organize the materials, and to make possible the writing and publication of the book of CPS stories.

This Project will be a large undertaking, and a worthwhile one. But it is also one for which time is running out. I hope you will want to join in making it possible. If you can help, please indicate what you can do on the form below and let us hear from you soon.

Thank you,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

Return this sheet to:

CPS, P.O. Box 1361, Falls Church VA 22041

Dear Chuck Fager,

Here's how I can help with the CPS Oral History Project (Check one or more):

- _____ I'm a CPS alumnus or close family member; I'd like to be interviewed.
- _____ I know CPSers and am enclosing their names and addresses. (Use a separate sheet if necessary.)
- _____ I will be a volunteer interviewer.
- _____ I can transcribe taped interviews.
- _____ Here's a tax-deductible donation for the Project. (Please Make checks out to: Langley Hill Friends Meeting--CPS Project.)

My Name: _____

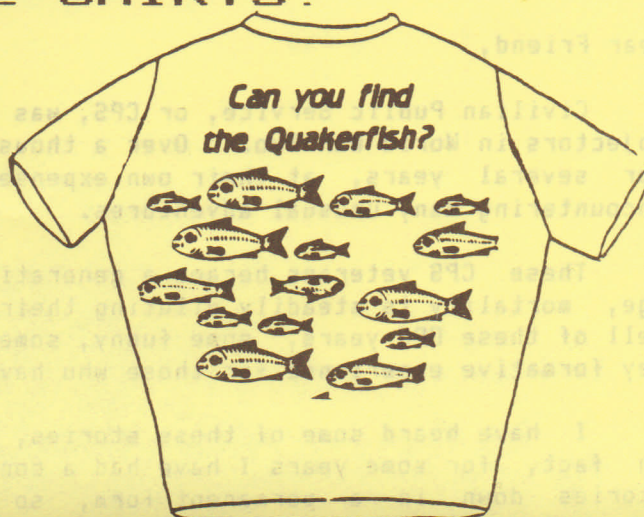
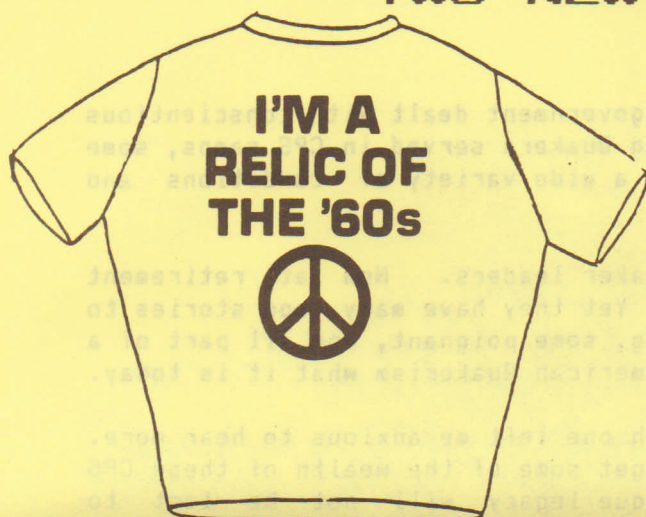
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Phone: (_____) _____

ZIP _____

A CRAZY IDEA--

TWO NEW TEE SHIRTS!



Some years ago a discerning acquaintance presented me with a Tee shirt bearing the logo, "I'm a Relic of the '60s." It certainly speaks of my condition, and must speak to that of some others, because many people have asked me where it came from and where they could get one. Never having seen another one, I have finally decided to yield to an impulse and make some. So here they are, in yellow, white or blue.

And while I was at it, I figured it was also worth trying some with one of the most popular of our recent Quaker button designs, "Can You Find The Quakerfish?" Same colors.

In offering them, let me add a word about selling tee shirts: In small quantities like this, they are generally a losing proposition for a retailer: Nobody, it seems, is satisfied with your array of colors(are we supposedly plain Quakers especially picky about this, or am I just oversensitive?); then there's the problem of fabric(100% cotton is "natural," but cotton/poly wears better); and not least, unless you're making hundreds or thousands at a time, they're no bargain to produce.

So do I need this aggravation? No. It's just that now and then a tee shirt idea gets to nagging at me til I have to try it out. Like now. But to minimize the associated hassles, they will be made in small batches as orders come in, so it will take a few weeks to get them shipped out. Plus they are priced at the high end, in hopes that I will at least break even. And if you want another color, dye a white one.

Thus warned, here's the coupon to use for your order:

Dear Chuck:

Send orders to: Shirts, P.O. Box 1361
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Send me the tee shirts listed below, at \$10.95 per shirt postpaid; two or more shirts, \$10 each postpaid. My payment is enclosed.

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COLORS: PINK, BLUE AND WHITE

I'M A RELIC: How many? _____

SIZE(S) _____

COLOR(S) _____

QUAKERFISH: How many? _____

SIZE(S) _____

COLORS _____

Send to: NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

ZIP _____

face the facts about Vietnamese prison camps or the Cambodian holocaust because of their sympathy for these movements. In my view that was neither wise nor harmless.

While never going that far, I certainly felt the same pull toward the insurgents as my revulsion against the U.S. role in southeast Asia deepened. Nothing that has happened since 1975, including the strenuous revisionist efforts of the present administration, has made me doubt the correctness of opposing American participation in the Vietnam war; but much that has happened since then has made me grateful that I was preserved from adding to that opposition support for the North Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge.

Facing the Fragility of Rights On the Left

To be sure, I once sympathized with the Sandinistas, especially in the early days, when anything seemed likely to be better than the old Somoza regime. But over time, the most credible reports from there have become more and more unsettling, and today I see what may be certain disturbing parallels between postwar Indochina and trends in Nicaragua. It is no big expose, for instance, to point out that the governing Sandinista party is a Marxist-Leninist body with strong affinities for--and formal ties with--the Soviet Union; this is no expose because the Sandinistas are quite open about these sympathies, even though many U.S. Sandinista supporters prefer to play them down. And this makes me question that party's seriousness about respecting what Marxists call "bourgeois civil liberties," such as freedom of the press and various guarantees of citizens' rights, particularly dissenters. These are matters which I take very seriously. And in recent months, reports of human rights abuses in Nicaragua, especially where dissenters are concerned, have grown increasingly gloomy.

Sandinista partisans contend that most of this is due to the Contra war; were it not for that, the society would be more open. Maybe; certainly the war makes everything worse, and U.S. support for it should be stopped--but that, remember, is the easy part. I am still skeptical enough of the government's commitments to human rights to want to keep my witness, and those I support, as disentangled from that government as possible.

As the Vietnam experience suggests, it is not easy to maintain, even with the best of intentions, a effectively disinterested stance amid the polarization which typically comes with war. This may be particularly true when we are citizens of a nation that is at one of the poles, as was true in Vietnam and again in relation to Nicaragua. Yet many of the groups that have appealed to me for help have made their case in terms which accept this polarization, but typically from the other end: Sandinistas are good, Contras--and--U.S. bad.

Probing Questions, and Plain Speaking

But actual situations are seldom that simple: The U.S. support for the contra terror campaigns is indeed bad; but that does not mean saving the Sandinista government is required for the good of the Nicaraguan people(though it has certainly done some beneficial things). It seems to me that as a general rule, part of the wisdom being sought here includes becoming able to think and act outside the terms of this wartime polarization, in ways which can have the effect, eventually if not immediately, of helping undercut it, planting the seeds of reconciliation and a return to peace, in whatever political shape that might take.

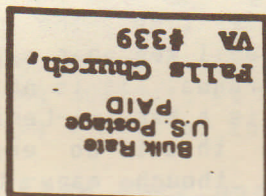
Hence at this point, in dealing with appeals for help from various projects and programs on behalf of Nicaragua, I am focussing more right now on formulating and persistently asking some questions about their work which I hope reflect this perspective: Do these groups set this "wise harmlessness" as a goal? Can they show a track record of actually working in that way? Do they present the situation in polarized terms, making excuses for one side while utterly condemning the other? Has their reporting proved reliable?

So far I have more questions than answers, but intend to continue probing. As I do so, the comments of two ordinary Nicaraguan women to Sarah Scattergood stick in my mind along with the Bible verses: "I asked (one) woman...who she supported. She said, 'An honest man.' I asked her who that was. She said, 'I don't know one.'" Sarah talked with the other woman, a Jehovah's Witness, in a bread line. The woman said: "This Reagan, he thinks he's God. Ortega, he thinks he's God. Somoza, he thought he was God. Me, I just follow God."

This non-Friend speaks my mind.

POSTMASTER: Time-dated newsletter. Do not delay.

INSIDE: SEEKING WISDOM
ON NICARAGUA



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

THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

Speaking of revolutions, here's a not-so-wonderful leaf from the annals of our own: In the fall of 1778, two Philadelphia Friends, Abraham Carlisle and John Roberts, were tried for treason by the American authorities. Their misfortune came after the British forces had evacuated the city in Sixth Month of that same year, and Congress and the Executive Council of Pennsylvania had returned. Once the rebels were in power, they charged many local citizens with "knowingly and willingly" aiding the enemy, and tried them for treason.

Carlisle, a carpenter, had served at one of the gates to the city during the British occupation. Friends said he was there mainly to issue passes to the poor to buy flour; but the authorities insisted he let spies go out and reconnoiter the rebel-held countryside. Roberts was a wealthy mill owner; he was accused of urging the British General Howe's forces to push on from the battle of Brandywine, southwest of Philadelphia, to rescue the Friends who had earlier been exiled by the rebel authorities to Virginia. Roberts did not flee when the British left; he gave himself up for trial, insisting in his defense that all he wanted to do was relieve the suffering of some of the exiled prisoners.

Many of those who were tried were acquitted, or convicted and then pardoned. Carlisle and Roberts were not so lucky. On Eleventh Month Fourth, 1778, they were hung.

QUAKER CHUCKLE

Two Quaker elders of the old school were travelling once under a religious concern to a small rural meeting. On the way back it began to snow heavily and their carriage became stuck in a snowbank. The two elders finally made it to a farmhouse just as it became dark, and were welcomed for the night. But the house was cold, and their attic room was like an icebox.

The eldest of the elders stripped to his underwear and jumped into a feather bed, pulling the blankets over him. The younger elder, feeling a bit embarrassed, said, "Excuse me, Friend, but doesn't thee think we ought to say our prayers before retiring?"

The other elder stuck one eye out from under the covers. "Son," he said, "I keep prayed up ahead for just such situations as this, and so should thee."
