



AN INTERESTING DILEMMA, INDEED: "Across the country, evidence is mounting that alcohol consumption among young people is dropping. And that has put the makers of beer and booze in an awkward position. Many have taken steps recently to discourage alcohol abuse, especially among the young. But at the same time, they all market ferociously to young people...." *Wall Street Journal*, 6/14/1990

# A Friendly Letter

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Dear Friend,

My wife and I need your help. Here's why:

In 1980, our Langley Hill Meeting had its very own baby boom. Ten children were born, and another adopted, in that one year. Most were girls, including our Gulielma.

This was a unique outbreak of fertility among us. Ever since, this cluster of kids has been moving relentlessly through our First Day School classes like the proverbial pig in the python. Along the way, the group has, as Quaker educators would hope, gained in cohesiveness and spunk, a.k.a. the ability to drive unsuspecting instructors up the wall. They are a joy and, as teachers and parents say with that telltale wan smile, a challenge.

Furthermore, come Ninth Month they will be entering the fifth grade, and it is time that a serious religious education began addressing with them some of those areas wherein the rubber of our Quaker faith meets the hard and abrasive road of life in the nineties.

I refer, of course, to the S-word. That's **S-E-X** if you're in doubt. If your first reaction is, "*Why are they going to talk about that to these children? They're barely ten years old!*" I'm afraid I have distressing news for you. In fact, we may be getting a late start on it for some.

So in an effort to face up to our fate, MaryLou is preparing to rejoin the First Day School teaching ranks this autumn, with special concern to begin exploring what in our local public schools is delicately referred to as family life education. I have full confidence that she can handle the kids. But there is one small question on which she, and I, and perhaps a few other Friends in and around Langley Hill, would like some assistance. It is only this:

Just **what** should we adult Quakers be teaching our children about sex today? Or, to echo again that nagging query of George Fox, "*What Canst Thou say?*" What can we say, not in the abstract, and not simply concerning consenting adults in private, but as models, caretakers, transmitters of tradition and values--indeed, *teachers* of all these to our own offspring, physical and/or spiritual?

Normally, one turns for guidance in such matters to **Faith and Practice**, and I did. However, Baltimore Yearly Meeting's latest statement is as euphemistic as any

Victorian novel, advising daintily that sex is great "*in its proper context*" but needs "*restraint outside this context...*" with no hint of what "proper context" or "restraint" are. I also have Northwest YM's book, which declares that "*adultery and fornication are sinful*," as is "*the practice of sexual perversion in any form*", and it includes a list. While refreshingly forthright, this also seems to me, to speak plainly, more clear than correct on some things.

Perhaps the truest statement I have seen is in New England's 1985 **Faith and Practice**, which first acknowledges that "*In a time of confusion, Friends need to declare such truths about sexual relationships as they have discovered. At the moment, these are variously perceived in our Yearly Meeting.*" Thee can say that again.

But soon MaryLou will be facing a room full of strong-minded Quaker kids who are not interested in their elders' delicate doctrinal ballets. They will expect some straight talk, and they need to be taught some authentic values.

What should these be? Is it enough to tell them, *Just Say No?* How about, *Just Say Maybe?* Or would you settle for, *Just Say Yes--Sometimes?* (Ah, but when?) I invite, no, I urge you to share your thoughts on this.

But here are some caveats: First, skip the anatomy; I'll stipulate to that. And if you want to plead for "traditional values," please spell out what those values and traditions are. Or if something other, identify the values and traditions your alternative standards involve. And please be mindful of how these stated values cohere with your own history and experience: Are you prepared to preach what you practice? I am particularly interested in hearing from lesbian and gay Friends--what are your contributions to this task beyond pleading for acceptance?

I don't know about your meeting, but at Langley Hill we need to begin dealing with these and related questions. Help us out; your responses will be shared here as way opens, and I'll withhold your name if need be.

Yours in the Light,

*Chuck Fager*

Chuck Fager



## SEEKING WISDOM AMONG FRIENDS--AND FINDING HER

In my years of haphazard Bible study, different parts of the scriptures have commanded attention at different times. During the Vietnam era it was the prophets, with their angry and eloquent denunciations of official corruption, oppression and general faithlessness. Later, it was stories of Israel's main heroes, Jacob wrestling with God all night; and David mourning hopelessly for his rebellious, self-destructive son Absalom. Like many others, I have also grappled with Paul, finding him both obnoxious and strangely appealing; and I have returned repeatedly to the parables of Jesus.

In the last few years, however, I have been drawn--pulled, more precisely--to the part of the Bible known as the Wisdom books. (These include Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and in the Catholic canon The Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus/Sirach; plus many other passages.) Perhaps it is my age that has moved me; perhaps the zeitgeist. In any case, I have become a devoted, if still haphazard, student of Wisdom.

### AN EVERYDAY REVELATION

Part of the appeal, I know, has to do with revelation. I used to share what I think is a common view that in the Bible, revelation or inspiration takes the form of visions or dreams or other supernatural events; and while these were interesting, they were outside my experience. But in books like Proverbs, I came to see, "revelation" is drawn from everyday experience and observation: family relationships, commerce, nature, and government.

Furthermore, Wisdom not only uses experience that I can relate to, it also produces a form of "revelation" that I have experienced: a flash of insight from which is precipitated an aphorism summing up, synthesizing, and revealing a larger meaning in a whole body of experience. For instance, "*A wise son makes his father proud; a foolish one brings his mother grief.*" (Proverbs 10:1 NOTE: The quotations which follow are from the **Today's English Version**.) Such a saying becomes more "revealing" year by year as my children grow.

Moreover, this form of "inspiration" is one which I can also claim. I've

never had a vision; but I have generated a few proverbs. Here are two: "*A journalist's job is to seek out the facts. But a journalist's vocation is to seek out the truth.*" And: "*Money comes and goes; but time only goes.*"

Okay, so maybe they're not biblical quality; but they are authentic. And they "reveal" much about what, if anything, I have learned about life, my own store of "wisdom." There is more to the scriptural wisdom tradition than form, however. In it at least two distinct strains of reflection coexist, and their complex relationship seems itself both profound and revealing.

One strand could be called the Hebrew Dress for Success Code. It is a long series of advices to prudent readers about very concrete matters. For instance, apropos of the Savings and Loan scandal, I was struck by Proverbs 11:15's warning that "*If you promise to pay a stranger's debts, you will regret it.*" (He--or was it she--got that right, for sure.)

### MY MOTHER WROTE YOUR BIBLE

On an even more mundane level, there's a hilarious passage in Chapters 31 and 32 of Ecclesiasticus about behavior at dinner parties, which opens with a no-nonsense charge that "*When you sit down at a fancy banquet, don't let your mouth hang open, and don't say 'Look at all that food!'...When you get your food, eat it like a human being. Don't smack and slurp; nobody can stand that.*" (Ecc. 31:12) When called on to act as host, it cautions, "*don't put on airs....If you are older than most of the guests, you may talk; that is your right. But you should know what you are talking about, and don't interrupt the music.*" (Ecc. 32:1,3) In chapter 41, it says you should be "*ashamed of leaning on the dinner table with your elbows.*" (41:19) [I always suspected that my mother got that straight from God!]

You get the idea. Besides the occasional howler, and the darker strains of misogyny and violence which show up in it, there is plenty of good counsel here that can help you get ahead. And it is all backed up by oft-repeated assurances that God is with you when you do right: "*The righteous*

*are protected from trouble; it comes to the wicked instead.*" (Pr. 11:8)

But there is something about these confident declarations about the divine equivalent of deposit insurance that rings false; in my experience life doesn't always turn out that way. And in fact, the go-go optimism of Proverbs faces a sharp challenge, from within the same Wisdom collection, in what could be called the pessimist or So-What strand of the tradition:

In Job, for instance, God puts an upright man through hell for no reason; in Ecclesiastes, the Preacher flatly contradicts Proverbs: "*Look at what happens in the world: sometimes righteous men get the punishment of the wicked, and wicked men get the reward of the righteous.*" No wonder he concludes, "*I say it is useless.*" (8:14) And "*What happens to fools is going to happen to me, too. So what have I gained from being so wise?*" "*Nothing, I answered, 'not a thing.'*" (2:15)

### MEET MY FRIEND SOPHIA

This dialogue--actually more like an argument--resonates, or in George Fox's terms *answers* to the ambiguity of my own experience: prudence and good manners *do* pay off, just as Proverbs (and Mother) said; but not every time, and not in a predictable way. The spectres of meaninglessness, suffering and death hang over us all.

But this existentialist debate, compelling as I find it in my middle years, is but one of Wisdom's dimensions. Perhaps even more important was the discovery that in these books, Wisdom is not treated as a concept, or a condition of age; no, here Wisdom is a person, a divine person, and a *woman*. Sophia is her Greek name, and her praises are sung in terms that, while formally observing the strictures of Israelite monotheism, effectively put her on a level with that old Hebrew patriarch Yahweh.

What is going on here? How did a goddess turn up in this most patriarchal of traditions? The scholars argue various theories, the Jungians speak persuasively of archetypes, and the history of Judaism and Christianity



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shows Sophia as a figure whose elaboration was soon suppressed by the males who were in charge of the cult.

But we'll leave all that aside here. Sophia still made it into the canon, trailing praises and adjectives otherwise reserved for the Old Thunderer Himself. And my fascination with her grew as I tracked down the passages about her, which showed clearly that she was not only on a level with the Bible's God the Father, but was in fact also identified with God's Son: Jesus.

It's true: At two points in Ecclesiasticus, Sophia, Lady Wisdom, is described as "*the word spoken by God*," (Ecclus. 1:5, 24:3). She is also called the manifestation of universal divine Light. Everything was created through her (Proverbs 8:22ff). All of this is repeated and applied to Jesus in the Gospel of John, Chapter One: "In the beginning was the word...."

#### JESUS THE ANDROGYNE

This was exciting to me for another reason: it confirmed what my Catholic youth and studies in Jungian psychology had taught me, that on a symbolic, archetypal level, Christ was androgynous. For instance, in Catholic doctrine, the Church is the "mystical body of Christ," yet in Catholic language the church is always a she, indeed more than she: It is *Holy Mother Church*. And Paul also calls Jesus "the Wisdom (Sophia) of God" (1 Corinthians 1:25, 30).

These connections have been more fully explored and articulated by a growing body of feminist bible scholars. An excellent summary from a Quaker feminist perspective is in Cynthia Taylor's essay, "Who Is Sophia? And Why Is She Important?" in *Reclaiming a Resource: Essays from the Friends Bible Conference*. (Which is, incidentally, now available from Kimo Press, P.O. Box 1361, Falls Church VA 22041, for \$12.95 plus \$2.00 shipping.)

Again, we'll leave all that aside for now. The focus here is my personal response to these unfolding connections, which included a growing realization that Jesus as Wisdom/Sophia, especially as she is drawn in the Wisdom books, made sense out of many puzzling aspects of Jesus' life and teaching:

Why, for instance, he/she was so vague about the sort of church he/she wanted to found, if any (Sophia is promiscuously ecumenical, seeking and teaching her followers everywhere); why his/her teachings so typically took the form of parables drawn from everyday experience, like the wisdom proverbs and stories; why his insistence on a non-military, non-monarchical and non-territorial "kingdom of God" was such a conundrum to his/her male disciples, including the authors of the canonical gospels. And not least, why he/she was so atypically affirmative with women, to the point where women apostles were running churches when the upstart Paul came along (See Romans 16:7). (This subversive phenomenon was dumped by the new Christian patriarchs as soon as possible.)

#### SOPHIA: A FRIEND OF FRIENDS?

The other reason all this was so exciting is that besides addressing concerns about biblical sexism in an original and promising way, it also struck repeated harmonious chords with my Quakerism. It is in John (the "Quaker Gospel"), for instance, that Jesus speaks the "Quaker verse" (15:15): "*No longer do I call you servants...but I have called you friends.*" And where else in the Bible's relentlessly hierarchical thought world will you find the divine-human relationship described in such equalitarian terms? Well, look again at Proverbs, 7:4: "Treat Wisdom as your sister, and insight as your closest friend." In The Wisdom of Solomon, she is described as "a friend of humanity." (7:23)

Sophia is also described as a kind of Light: "*Hers is a brightness that never grows dim, and I preferred it to any other light.*" (Wisdom of Solomon 7:10.) Following her offers a form of continuing revelation, for "*the spirit of wisdom...is of one nature but reveals itself in many ways.*" (Wisdom of Solomon 7:22) and "*No one can ever exhaust the treasures of wisdom. Use those treasures and you are God's friends.*" (7:14) The F-word again.

It should now be evident that I am a big fan of Sophia. But I am not her only Quaker admirer: When Cynthia Taylor gave a workshop on Sophia at the Friends Bible Conference, it was packed to overflowing, and the

enthusiasm was so high that we could happily have gone on all day.

Besides Sophia's innate appeal, part of what was drawing us to her had to do with the way she seems to tie together so many seemingly disparate strands of our religious life: an accessible form of revelation; recovery of the feminine side of God; an intimate and illuminating connection with Jesus; and seemingly endless, affirming resonance with Quaker peculiarities within the larger stream of Christianity.

This last is one that is particularly meaningful to me: Lady Wisdom presents a connecting image between the irresistible thrusts of feminism and pluralism that are so much a part of Quaker and Christian religious life today, and the biblical-Christian heritage which, try as some of us might, we just can't seem to shake. She is also a universalist: God "filled everything he made with Wisdom. He gave some measure of wisdom to everyone, but poured her out on those who love him." Ecclesiasticus 1:9,10)

#### A CONNECTION REGAINED

Sophia emerged at a time when Hebrew religion had been wrenched out of its Palestinian provincialism and immersed in a larger cosmopolitan culture. Gone was the chance to exterminate all the heathens, as the war-God of the patriarchal sagas commanded; so was it now possible that Yahweh could approve of trying to understand the measure of Light that had been granted these other cultures?

Not, to be sure, that patriarchal Hebrew religion, or Christianity later, was able to give up its imperial pretensions and face such an unsettling learning process with much equanimity. Sophiology was squelched by the rabbis, and split by the bishops between the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. Carl Jung has insisted in his book, *Answer to Job*, that in the twentieth century, this learning task, and the feminine figure who represented it, had finally and inescapably emerged again. I think he was essentially right, and that those Friends for whom Wisdom can become a living image will find that as Quakers they are well-equipped to "Get wisdom and insight!" (Proverbs 4:5) and to make creative use of what she has to offer.





INSIDE: MEET THE NEW QUAKER WOMAN  
OF THE NINETIES--  
ONE OF HER NAMES IS JESUS

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### THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

Concentration camps were a Nazi invention, Right? Wrong. They were first used by the British, during the Boer War against the Dutch-descended colonists of South Africa in 1900. The circumstances which produced them should sound familiar: When the Boer forces couldn't win large battles, they turned to guerilla warfare. To deprive these rebellious "fish" of their widely-dispersed rural "ponds," the British rounded up thousands of women and children, burned their homes and farms, and herded them into what were correctly called "concentration camps."

The British government worked hard at controlling and censoring the news from South Africa, but even so horror stories about life--and death--in the camps soon surfaced. The most sensational reports came from Emily Hobhouse, a noted reformer and temperance worker who traveled to South Africa and visited the camps at her own expense. She sent back a series of sensational reports about starvation, disease and repression in the camps.

When she returned home, the militant pro-war forces were not content with manipulation of the press. She was repeatedly denied access to public halls, especially in London, to make public reports to interested groups. And

when a crowd did manage to gather, the meetings were repeatedly broken up by hooligans throwing bricks, breaking windows and threatening her with bodily harm.

Emily Hobhouse was not a Quaker; but repeatedly it was in Quaker meetinghouses and under Quaker auspices that she made--or attempted to make--her reports. In some places she was successful; but in others, as in Darlington, where she shared the platform with several very weighty Quakers, she was prevented from uttering a word.

And so it was that in 7/1900, London Yearly Meeting's executive committee, the Meeting for Sufferings, was asked to offer Emily Hobhouse the use of its facilities to break the authorities' effective lockout against her in the capital. There was much hemming and hawing: some Friends feared violence; others were worried about being accused of partisan politics. Finally, however, it was agreed, and she was offered the use of a London meetinghouse.

That meeting didn't come off, for other reasons; but the struggle of many Friends to preserve the vaunted British freedoms of speech and assembly in the face of militaristic propaganda continued throughout the war.

### QUAKER CHUCKLES

John Wilbur, the godfather of Conservative Quakerism, was a thrifty man, as would be expected. But just how thrifty was shown in a visit to a dentist in Philadelphia, when a journey in the ministry was interrupted by a bad toothache.

The dentist, who was a believer in the latest in dental technology, looked in Wilbur's mouth a good while, and then asked, "Mr. Wilbur, could you pay for a dental plate if I found one necessary?"

The Quaker thought a moment and then said, "Friend, would thee find one necessary if I *couldn't* pay for it?"

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A Quaker and a UN soldier were in the African jungle, when suddenly a lion leaped out of the bushes, grabbed the soldier and started to drag him away. "Shoot! Shoot!!" cried the soldier.

"I can't," yelled the Friend, "I'm all out of film!"