



NEEDED-A QUAKER PEACE THINK TANK: The Cold War really *has* ended, but too many Quaker peace types still act as if nothing has changed. It has; and it's past time for some serious new *thinking* and *writing* to be done among Friends on what the Peace testimony means NOW. Yo! AFSC, FCNL, Friends Peace Committee: Listen up-there's work to do!

A Friendly Letter

LAST ISSUE--#134

Selected for Who's Who In Religion

FIRST MONTH, 1993

Dear Friend,

When I announced a sabbatical from *A Friendly Letter*, I said it was time to retreat and reflect, pursue some other projects, and reexamine my leading as to continuing with the newsletter at all. I promised to let you know of my plans by the end of the year.

Well, year's end is past, and it's time to report. Not that I've been procrastinating. Hardly; two months have passed since I began writing this letter, and almost thirty drafts emerged from my printer before what you hold in your hands was settled on.

One of my major sabbatical projects was preparing four lectures on Wisdom in the Biblical and Quaker traditions. These were delivered at William Penn House in Washington DC last fall. For me they were a chance to kill three birds with one stone: to examine Wisdom as a part of Scripture; to explore it as a spiritual resource; and to see whether the first two could help me find clarity and resolve about the newsletter's future.

This study of Wisdom texts was very rewarding, in many ways. But it was also ironic, in that when all was said and done, the most convicting and truthful statement in them for me was also one of the most familiar. You know the passage; it's from Ecclesiastes, chapter Three:

"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven....

"A time to plant, and a time to uproot what is planted."

And this, ultimately, was what I came to: After almost twelve years, it is time to uproot, or in Quaker parlance to lay down, *A Friendly Letter*.

In cold print this decision sounds deceptively easy, almost glib. But in my life, the last decision this hard, this anguishing, was getting divorced; which may be a not inapt analogy to this process.

How did this come about? There are reflections on some of the reasons inside. It has been particularly tough deciding whether to resume publishing, but less often, to make time for other projects. In the end, though, this felt more like a temporizing concession than an authentic response to my needs and leadings.

So, difficult as the transition may be, I intend to take a few deep breaths and go cold turkey, to walk away, to start over. My new goal, in sum, is to try and learn how to become a writer, this time of books, and hopefully volumes that can appeal to general readers.

Even so, it is too much to think I could just forget about Friends in my writing, or completely resist the temptation to comment now and then on our Quaker soap operas. For that matter, maybe the time will come to resuscitate *A Friendly Letter*: A particularly urgent situation, or some intolerable outrage, will evoke a special issue; like the Good Book says, *"The wind bloweth where it will, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but thou knowest not whence it cometh nor whither it goeth. And so likewise returneth the Gadfly."* (John 3:8, somewhat revised) So we shall see.

Such speculations aside, there is a practical matter to attend to. Many of you have issues yet to run on your subscriptions. And three other publications, *Quaker Life*, *Friends Journal*, and the *Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns Newsletter*, stand ready to fulfill the remaining numbers. You can sign up by checking the appropriate box on the coupon and sending it to the magazine of your choice. If you are already a subscriber, your subscription will be extended.

To make the change, look at your address label. There should be two numbers on the top line, like this: 1223/138. The three digits *after* the slash are the important ones. Subtract from them the number 134 (the number of the last issue) and the remainder is how many more you have coming. Like this:

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Issues remaining 4

Simple, yes?

Thank you again for your support, your letters, your eldering, and your prayers. I will need all of these in this new phase of my spiritual journey.

And if you will miss *A Friendly Letter*, so will I. But don't worry: One way or another, you'll be hearing from me again.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

Laying down *A Friendly Letter* is hard for at least three reasons, and the most obvious is the journalistic one: There are still many major Quaker issues and news stories waiting to be reported. The niche the newsletter has filled yawns as widely now as it did when I started, if not wider.

Where, for instance, are you likely to read about the following:

- ♦ The widely differing roles played by leading Evangelical Friends in the anti-gay rights referenda campaigns in Colorado and Oregon last year. Did they affect the outcomes? What does this mean for Friends? With anti-gay agitation becoming the top issue for the American right wing, how much of Quakerism will be drawn into these campaigns of hate?

- ♦ Why did Indiana YM's evangelical hardliners try to purge Earlham College President Dick Wood last summer, by packing the college board? What are their chances of succeeding this year?

UPHEAVAL AT EARLHAM

- ♦ What will happen to the American Friends Service Committee's program of self-examination and internal reform? It's now entering the climactic phases. So far it's given some hope to those wanting to strengthen ties between AFSC and Friends; but it also faces many hazards and pitfalls. Will AFSC regain a Quaker identity? Will it retain its place as a leading social witness advocate?

- ♦ What was it that an autocratic clerk of Ministry and Counsel tried to ram through North Carolina YM? And how was a courageous, principled Presiding Clerk able to stop him? Who has since been condemned as the "stonecutters of Satan" in circular letters among Tarheel Friends?

- ♦ Friends United Meeting (FUM) will soon try to write a "mission statement." Watch for another nasty "preacher's putsch," aimed at making it an exclusionary creed. And there could well be another flap at FUM's Triennial this summer, over the featured speaker, author Madeleine L'Engle. She's a fervent Christian, but also rather an open-minded one, impatient with simp-

listic biblical literalism, or us-versus-them punitive Christian moralizing. She even wrote an article on feminist spirituality for *Ms. Magazine*. As she is thus "unmasked," will she be treated as shabbily as Elizabeth Watson was at FUM in 1984, or Dorothy Reichardt in 1990? This year, I'll find out secondhand: The FUM Triennial is on my skip list; after four such smarmy sessions, I've paid enough dues there.

There are many more similar topics on my private list, not all controversial: The Western Gathering of Friends last summer brought a wide range of Quakers together peaceably and successfully. Was it the beginning, along with YouthQuake earlier in the year, of a constructive countertrend to the fragmentation sown by the "realignment" campaign earlier on? (I hope so, but I wonder....)

NOVEL IDEAS FOR FRIENDS

And have you heard of the three new mainstream novels with Quaker characters and settings? One is a historical saga, one is for young readers, and the third is a mystery. I've hunted down and read them all with pleasure. Could it be that Friends, fictionally at least, are becoming fashionable? Is that good?

You get the idea. The novels, at least, will likely be reviewed, eventually, in one place or another. (You could also order them from the FGC Bookstore at 1-800-966-4556 and do your own reviews).

As for the other items, and the dozen or so more on my list, don't count on it. Mainstream Quaker publications are still mostly as mealy-mouthed and lily-livered as ever when it comes to dealing with the tough Quaker news and issues.

But knowing that, about half the time I feel like more of a quitter than Ross Perot. Still, as my guru Ecclesiastes says, (broadly paraphrased) if I put out an issue a month til I was 93, chances are there would still be plenty of such stuff yet to be reported. (Cf. Ec. 1:9)

So in the meantime, if *A Friendly Letter* has served a useful purpose for Friends, as I think it has, my hope for this purpose now rests in the orthodox Christian doctrine of the apostolic

succession: that the Spirit will move someone else to step forward and take up the work, in their own way, in their own time, and perhaps do it better. Are any of you out there ready to start calling them as thee sees them, in print, letting the fur fly and the chips fall? (Thee can borrow my bulletproof vest; it's plain grey.)

But as I said, that's only one reason it's hard to let go. Another, perhaps even tougher one for me, is that it also means detaching from a whole political-cultural stance, an entire persona.

Casual readers of *A Friendly Letter*, especially its more notorious reports, could be excused for imagining me to be something of an activist. After all, many if not most of its issues have been about "worldly" matters: war, peace, social justice, or stirring the pots of Quaker controversies.

THE ACTIVIST INTROVERT

All true. But at a deep level, all wrong. Not about the writing, perhaps, but about the writer, who is, in fact, very much an introvert, with Meyers-Briggs charts to prove it. I'm actually more drawn to ideas and images than to other people and outward events, or rather, I find my way among these outward things via their inward aspects, at least as I experience them.

One way to gauge this is to do a quick content analysis of *A Friendly Letter*: For instance, there were many more issues (17) devoted to book reviews than to such seemingly perennial targets as the AFSC (a mere 10).

But there's a paradox here: I believe a closer look at the body of my work would show it to be the product of a very inwardly-oriented personality. Yet for most of my adult life the raw material and primary media for my writing have been those of the external world and the flow of public events.

I blame this anomaly on history, on the perverse fate of having come of age in interesting times. You know which ones, The Sixties: Vietnam, civil rights, women's and gay liberation, etc. Many of my peers managed to sidestep these upheavals: I recall the dedicated academic grinds who, when the noise of campus activism intruded upon their foraging in the library stacks, resolutely

shut the windows by their study carrels and kept reading.

Theirs was a legitimate choice, and they are now reaping the harvest of their diligence with tenure, long vitae, and even cabinet appointments. In a way I envy them.

But not much. I loved the libraries, too, then and now, but couldn't ignore what the shouts were about, and shut the books instead. True, I took up pen and typewriter rather than the gun or even the political campaign, but my path was just as involving, just as, pardon the expression, activist.

Those years passed, of course, and, like others, I worked at moving on. But then, suddenly it was the Eighties, and a determined, reactionary political faction had come to power. They were out to discredit and roll back everything we Sixties types had closed those books for, and our side was taking a helluva beating.

Those were dark days. Their cost was high, both domestically and abroad. I often felt like an exile in my native land then, and more than once considered actual exile.

STAYING HOME, KEEPING BUSY

But instead, I returned to form and resolved to resist. A *Friendly Letter* was a major part of this renewed resistance. To the politically-minded, it might seem a curious stratagem; how many congressional districts turn on the Quaker vote? But for me it was the right response: As I read the signs of the times, we were facing spiritual combat as well as political struggle; so what stronghold was more important to defend than my spiritual community?

Besides, in the latter years of the Seventies, I had begun noticing that there were a lot of important Quaker events and issues which were not being covered in the mainstream Quaker journals, which I knew was an unhealthy situation.

In fact, the seed of the newsletter was planted back in 1977, at the fabled Wichita Gathering of Friends in the Americas. It was the first time in fifty years Friends of all varieties had gathered in one place. It was also my first trip to a big Quaker confab, and I arrived with two firm intentions: First, not to do the reporting which was my typical practice; I was

not going to do it there, because I wanted no distractions from my second and more important intention, which was to prospect intensively for new Friendly female companionship; a wife, in short.

Naturally, none of it worked out as planned. That same summer, 1977, was when the issue of gay rights burst permanently onto the national consciousness and agenda, thanks in large part to singer Anita Bryant and her crusade against a gay rights ordinance in Miami. And when the Quakers arrived in Wichita, they brought the H-word with them, in the form of a Philadelphia Yearly Meeting committee which quietly but insistently demanded the same exhibit and newsletter rights as all the dozens of other Quaker groups represented.

You can guess what happened: the evangelicals went ballistic, and the conference almost went up in smoke; the local newspaper picked up the scent and splashed the story all over the region. Before it was all over, I had given up the wife-hunt, bought myself a notebook, and written a sizeable article on the whole crazy episode.

DISCOVERING THE GORILLA

It was a reasonably good article, if I do say so myself; even one of the evangelical protagonists later told me it was "fair." Called "Quaking Over Gay Rights," (copies still available, \$5.00 each from my address) I ended up selling it to four different secular newspapers, and it paid for most of the trip.

But a funny thing happened to that article: No Quaker publication would touch it with a ten-foot pole. For whatever reason, they didn't want to hear about the problems in Wichita; and all the reports on the Conference in Friends publications were compilations of happy talk; you could look it up.

This reaction from Quaker editors was puzzling, but I took the bus home and went on about my business. Over the next few years, though, moving more widely among Friends, I kept having eerily similar experiences of stumbling upon what to a journalist's eyes were major stories, but about which I hadn't read a word in official publications.

It wasn't that I was sneaking around poking into anybody's private

files or anything; the stories were right there in plain sight-like the 500-lb gorilla in the middle of the dysfunctional family's living room, the one everyone carefully tiptoes around and never mentions.

Eventually, it got to be too much. For the reporter in me, these stories were like a series of unscratched itches; cumulatively it was torture not to be able to scratch them.

In late 1980, I thought there might be a chance to scratch these itches and get paid for it, when the editorship of *Friends Journal* came open. I applied for it, and was interviewed. Preparing for the interview, I developed a list of stories and features which I thought would spice up the magazine: not just investigative reporting, but features too, like profiles of interesting Quakers, more and better book reviews, vignettes from our history; and, of course, humor.

I had already tested some of these as editor of *the Langley Hill Friend*, my monthly meeting newsletter. This field work had convinced me that Quaker publications had to have humor, I told the committee, in every issue. In our world, it was not to be considered optional.

DOING IT ON MY OWN

The committee at FJ reportedly liked my recipe, but not quite as well as they liked that of the late Olcott Sanders, who got the job instead.

When the news came, I felt bad for about a day. But then I looked back over the sheet of ideas for the FJ interview and thought, I really like these ideas. In fact, I like them enough, that I want to try them out regardless.

But in what publication? I had passed on the Langley Hill editorship. The answer seemed to be that it would have to be one of my own. Checking my savings account balance, and the prices at a local newsletter printer, the thing seemed doable.

So I did it, in Third Month 1981. And the rest, now, is history.

Time has, I think, borne out the utility of the impulse behind the newsletter. The Society of Friends was called upon in those years, as before, to be more than simply a religious home for its members and attenders.

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This challenge reached a climax for me in the Gulf War, and I believe unprogrammed Friends bore the Peace Testimony then with much faithfulness. (Pastoral Quakerdom is another, less edifying, story.)

We also, of course, had to cope with the manifestations of these divisive forces in our own ranks. On one side there was a tangle of conflicts, over homosexuality, the universality of Quaker faith, and power grabs by ambitious pastors. On the other side was a stifling and stale social gospel liberalism, which equated Quaker faith with the latest liberal political bandwagon.

Through the Eighties this latter trend was progressively displaced by a more clearly religious, if doctrinally hazy, resurgence of Quaker mysticism. I welcomed this development, but its inclusiveness of gays and feminist spirituality scared the hardliners even more than the old left-liberals did.

STALKING THE QUAKER VAMPIRE

The tensions among these divergent strains culminated in the acrimonious struggle over "realignment." And if *A Friendly Letter* were remembered for nothing more than helping expose and thwart that crackpot scheme, it would be enough. (*If only it were in fact thwarted for good! Alas, the impulse is not dead, but only resting, waiting to rise like Dracula from its pastoral coffin, to suck more lifeblood from the Society, especially its favorite victim, the evermore anemic FUM.*)

The question of whether and how Friends can cope with our diversity remains unanswered. Yet despite our troubles, Quakerism in the Eighties again managed to fulfil its calling and proved to be both a seedbed for constructive public witness, and a refuge from the heat and pain of ongoing struggles. I'm grateful to have been a chronicler among Friends in this trying time.

Now, it seems, the political pendulum may at last be swinging back a bit. The barbarians--some of them--have been turned out of the gates, for the moment at least. Many positive changes, we are assured, will follow from the transition now underway in Washington.

The one I am looking forward to most, though, is not a beginning but an

end: an end to the relentless, officially-sponsored trashing of the heroes, values and saga of my activist generation. I think it will happen; after all, the new president was almost one of us once, even if he didn't inhale. And besides, it won't add to the deficit.

The prospect of being on friendly terms again with those in power is novel to say the least; for the true activist, it opens up many possibilities for new programs, projects and crusades. But to one as essentially inwardly-oriented as myself, the prospect appears rather different. I hope to do my bit as a writer toward my generation's rehabilitation. But the main question that arises is whether one might now be able to step back from the fray, to begin at last learning to go with the grain of my psyche and its inclinations, instead of against it.

This brings into focus the third reason why laying down *A Friendly Letter* is hard for me: While the journalism was fun, and the resistance seemed imperative, at bottom it has been, at least in intention, Spirit-driven. It was a phase of my spiritual journey as a Friend among Friends.

A RUDE AWAKENING

This fact becomes the more salient because, beneath the *sturm und drang* of the reporting, a counter-current has long been gathering force: historical exploration; Bible study; theological musings; teaching; and, oh yes, story-telling. Last spring, this current became irresistible, in a manner well-described by Friend Patricia Loring in a new Pendle Hill pamphlet on discernment:

"There can be times in our lives when an utterly logical course, which was previously satisfying, suddenly seems barren or false--or it may just close down, forcing us into painful reexamination of the way we are to go. We may be seized by a sudden conviction that it is time to break with our past and begin some particular new venture....Or we may wake one morning to find that a slow process of which we've been only marginally aware has crystallized, with a host of implications."

That's about the size of it. (If you like this quote, order Pat's pamphlet from Pendle Hill at 1-800-742-3150. It's PHP #305.)

Faced with such a turn, I'm

grateful now for one clearly providential intervention which helped keep the newsletter on this track--though I resisted it all the way: The fact that beyond paying its bills *A Friendly Letter* never made any money. Hard as it has been to face laying it down, it would have been impossible if your subscription checks were paying the mortgage.

These new impulses are toward what the secularized politicians think of as "soft" stuff, which they don't really give a hoot about, unless it can be folded into ceremonial speeches, or turned into diverting fiction.

Such skeptical reactions are not merely external, though. After all these years, I too am accustomed, even addicted, to news and public issues; my persona as the troublemaking Quaker gadfly is deeply-ingrained. What would I do without these? Who would I be? Would anyone want to read what emerges from these other leadings? Does this, in sum, mean I'm really supposed to be *serious* about this "minding the Light" business?? (Is that sound I hear an echo of the apostle Paul's charge to "work out your salvation in fear and trembling" in Philippians 2:12?)

AVE ATQUE VALE, FRIENDS

We'll just have to see about all that. I do know that, at a deep level, inward and outward are connected--as the feminist adage says, "the personal is political": Constructive cultivation of individual talents enriches the public sphere. I might also add that the spiritual is political too: Think of John Woolman, or Eliza-beth Fry. As Friends' recent record also shows, pursuing the implications of our faith always reverberates into the larger culture in one way or another. The potential connections are clear enough in my own case: many of the stories I want to tell, both personal and fictional, relate to events and concerns which were so assiduously disparaged in the eighties.

In any event, what seems clear to me now is a call to turn my primary attention to this series of larger-scale, internally-driven writing projects. Such a shift amounts to no less than launching a new phase of my life, not to mention my vocation as a Friend and my career as a writer.

Wish me luck, and light. And the same to thee.

Forwarding & Address Correction Requested

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NOT THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

Actually, this section concerns *next* month in a most important Quaker history, namely yours. If in the absence of *A Friendly Letter* your fingers get itchy for an independent (i.e., non-monthly meeting) Quaker newsletter to read, help is on the way, or easily can be. In fact, if anything, you could easily fill a lot of free time keeping up with all the independent Quaker newsletters out there. And since many of them are inexpensive, it might be worth giving some a try. Here is an incomplete listing of some you might want to sample:

Where Grace Abounds (P.O. Box 18871, Denver CO 80218-0871; send a contribution), is a surprisingly non-hysterical evangelical Quaker ministry to lesbians and gays who want go straight.

The Plain Friend (1880 Andrews Rd., Stockport OH 43787), speaks for a hard-core Wilburite Quaker perspective; and where else can you get a hard-core quarterly for three bucks a year?

Old Foundation (%Joy Weaver, 20 Jenkins St., Islip,

NY 11751), is for "Jewish Friends" and other interested Quakers; and every issue is provocative. Ten bucks.

Friends Bulletin (1620 NW Menlo Drive, Corvallis OR 97330; \$12 per year). Eastern US Friends need it most, because it reports on unprogrammed Friends in the West, and eastern Friends should pay more attention.

Friends in Africa (P.O. Box 41946, Nairobi, Kenya). An indigenous review. Appears spasmodically; send \$12.

Educational Network (Ramallah Friends Schools, P.O. Box 66, Ramallah, west Bank, via Israel; send a contribution; they need money). Not much specific Quaker content; instead, front-line reports on how the Quaker and other private Palestinian schools in the West Bank are attempting to survive the Israeli Occupation.

Universalist Friends (Quaker Universalist Fellowship, Box 201, RD1, Landenberg PA 19350). For \$10 a year you get two issues of the newsletter, plus copies of various universalist-oriented speeches and articles.

There are lots more newsletters, but no more space.

QUAKER CHUCKLES

Has thee heard about the new Twelve-Step group for Friends who talk too much and too often in Meeting for worship?

It's called On-Anon. And on. And on.

When the family dog produced a large litter of pups, mother and father decreed that one hound was enough, and directed son Tommy to give the little ones away. A couple of Sundays later, Tommy showed up outside a local church, which loudly advertised itself as firmly rooted in literal biblical interpretation, personal salvation and sanctification. He was carrying a cardboard box with a sign taped to one side that read, "*Fundamentalist Puppies.*"

When he came home, there were still several pups left. So the next Sunday, he and the box were sent off

in another direction, toward a Quaker meetinghouse. This time, though, the sign on the box said, "*Quaker Puppies.*"

As he sat waiting for the Friends to emerge from the building, an older woman walked by, and stopped when she saw the sign. "Young man," she said, "didn't I see you outside the Bible church last week?" When the boy nodded, she said, "And didn't your sign say they were Fundamentalist puppies then?"

Another nod.

"Well then," she bored in, "how did they go from being Fundamentalists to being Quakers in one week, I wonder?"

The boy thought for a moment, then did his best. "Well, ma'am," he answered, "now their eyes are open."