

A Friendly Letter

Issue Twenty-Nine

Eighth Month, 1983

Dear Friend,

This is the second in an annual series of "feedback issues", in which the steady flow of letters from readers of *A Friendly Letter* is sampled and considered. As was explained in the previous issue, there is not space for a regular letters column, so this is the best substitute I have come up with. And as I have also said before, readers who are moved to comment on something published here are encouraged to send their opinions along; if I can't publish many, I reply to almost all.

On the subject of reader feedback, there has been some on our last issue, which attempted to list as many varieties of theological perspective among unprogrammed Friends as I had come across. That list came to eight; and I have already heard from readers of at least one more, which I will call The Syncretists, or the All-of-the-Above-ites. That is, as one Friend explained to me, there are those who looked over my listing and found they could identify with many, or even all of the various perspectives, at least to some degree. This was new to me; while I had not thought of the eight schools as necessarily mutually exclusive, still it seemed that there were some pretty significant gaps among some of them. Apparently this is not so for all of us. One other reader has written to elder me for overlooking much about some of the views mentioned. To this I can only reply that to charges of giving the schools short shrift and not doing them justice, I plead guilty in every case. It would take a book to do that; and a very interesting book it would be, too.

Turning to more seasonal matters, for most Quakers the summer is Yearly Meeting time. This was true for me, too, and I brought back from Baltimore Yearly Meeting a good-sized helping of our homegrown Quaker humor, which is displayed on page four in the usual place. It occurs to me, though, that there must be others who had a similar experience. I have found that Quakers tend to chuckle a lot in their Yearly Meeting sessions, even in the midst of laboring over weighty and controversial matters (as we did at Baltimore). So I want to urge readers, while their memories are fresh, to mull over the light moments of your sessions, and share them with us. These days, we need all the chuckles we can get.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

MORE FEEDBACK FROM FRIENDS--FRIENDLY AND OTHERWISE

As in its first year, readers of *A Friendly Letter* during the past 12 months have not been slow to tell me what they think of my monthly efforts at reporting and comment. And, like before, their responses have been both pro and con, often eloquently so.

The issue which produced the most letters was #25, Fourth Month, 1983, on the frequent failings of Quaker groups as employers. All the writers agreed with my contention that Friendly personnel practices are a persistent problem area. As one Indiana reader summed it up: "I've been the victim of several committee horror stories, and we could no doubt swap gossip sometime." A Virginian was more exercised: "Darn you, Chuck--" this response began, "the trouble with a thought provoking article is that there are times when one does not want to get provoked so that one can get some business done." But thus disrupted, this Friend observed that, regrettably, "churches--like unions--may feel that they are above the rules that govern everybody else. (But)...in fact there are lots of practical problems when one thinks he is following 'the higher good' and finds that his insensitive treatment of 'lesser beings' is destroying the lofty image he sincerely believes he is nurturing." Much of the problem, he thought, was structural: "No self-respecting business, even Quaker-run, would operate on as crazy a basis as most, or at least many, Quaker agencies do.

Zeroing In on the Dilemmas of Quaker Journalism

But some other correspondents, while ceding the point of the issue, disliked it. "I was troubled by your article," wrote a New Yorker. "Although you did raise some important points, I believe that that the article only underscores your insensitivity to the Religious Society of Friends by a muckraking kind of reporting, unbecoming a Quaker newsletter." This theme was amplified by a Marylander, who is connected with one of the organizations mentioned by name in the article. "I suspect that personnel management may be the place where the committee system of operation is most likely to fail..." she allowed. "However...(the article) is a fine example of how to make things worse rather than better." Specifically, this friend decried my reference to an unhappy staff situation. Although no names were mentioned, she still deplored what was seen as "Your offhand description of a painful situation in terms which exhibit the wounded principals before the prurient gaze of your readers is inexcusable. I attempted to use the term unforgiveable, but that judgment I ought to leave to the almighty."

These letters point up some of the tensions to be faced in preparing such an article, and indeed almost every report which addresses difficult Quaker subjects: It is important journalistically to be concrete, to include the who, what, where, when and why; yet it is necessary too to be Quakerly, and speak of problems as gently and lovingly as truth permits. The balance is not always easy to strike. In addition, there is the matter of complexity: it is a rare Quaker issue--and personnel issues above all--which has as few as two sides to it. One could spend months, as committees too often do, sorting out the various perspectives. Yet in my columns they must be spoken of briefly, to fit scarce space and for readers who already have too much to read. Such summary treatment almost guarantees some error, of omission at least.

To be sure, my own view has been that these tensions do not make the effort useless or inappropriate. Still, in making specific journalistic judgments it is very easy to trample facts and tender feelings, as the last writer felt I did unnecessarily.

Wringing the Rhetoric From a Rhetorical Question

Another question of judgment that evoked a warm response was not something actually published here, but rather the text of an advertisement for it. The ad, a classified in *Friends Journal* and *Quaker Life* last spring, posed the question: "Is the AFSC a Communist front? Get the surprising facts in *A Friendly Letter*," etc.

In addition to several inquiries, this ad drew a sharp protest from a New Jersey reader, a former subscriber. "What a sad way for a Quaker publication to try to increase sales," she lamented. "It is divisive and reminiscent of the tactics of innuendo used in

A UNIQUE CHILDREN'S BOOK

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

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"This is a chance for me to say again how important A Friendly Letter is to so many of us and what a superlative job you are doing with it." --A liberal New York Friend.

"Thy objective of reaching out to Friends of all varieties is essential, if the Religious Society of Friends is to survive." --A conservative Friend, Ohio.

"You would have been pleased to hear the discussion about renewing A Friendly Letter at our last Monthly Meeting. We agreed firmly that we did not always agree with you-- but we agreed even more firmly that we appreciated your willingness to talk about and present information on subjects Quakers wish would just go away." --Des Moines, Iowa.

"I think you are doing the most important work among Quakers today and I have wanted you to know it for some time." --A California Friend.

To be fair, **A Friendly Letter** has also occasionally been called irresponsible, inaccurate, even "a gutter press." But if you are concerned about the present and future of Quakerism in America, perhaps you should form your own opinion about it. It's easy to subscribe; just use the coupon below.

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the Joe McCarthy era." She concluded that "I consider it a slanderous and unsupported implication. At the very least it is extremely unfriendly."

Naturally I replied, rather tartly I admit, that the article(#19, 10/82) mentioned in the ad was in fact a vigorous refutation of of just such red-baiting innuendo, which was then being retailed by major publications and high public officials. This left the writer somewhat embarrassed, since she admitted she had not read the piece before writing, but she still persisted in her "objection to the implications of the ad." She felt it "kept alive and encouraged the doubts and accusations of people or groups trying to undermine the AFSC and its support of such issues as the freeze. As I recall your ad did not give any indication that such charges might be rebutted in your publication....Even though you did not intend this," she concluded, "I suspect many who read the ad would interpret it as I did."

I heard similar concerns raised by another thoughtful Friend, and this has left me pondering the wisdom of the ad. It was indeed intended to be provocative and attention-getting; hence the unanswered question. But this undoubtedly did create the possibility of misunderstanding by casual readers. But does it thereby "keep alive and encourage" the charges, which are still being circulated? And am I thereby made responsible for uninformed conclusions?

Front Groups and Friendly Fears

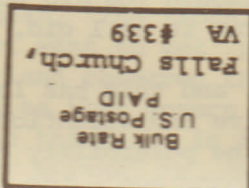
I wonder. Two other factors are important here, it seems to me: the first is that there really are such things as "front groups"; the Soviets have theirs, and through the CIA the U.S. operates its own. My report described evidence that the CIA had approached the AFSC with this in mind, but was rebuffed. The AFSC's long history of dealings with Russian citizens and officials has in my judgment been entirely appropriate to its Quaker peace efforts; but this history also makes the "Communist front group" question more than an idle one. Furthermore, the other relevant fact is that, however outrageous it may seem to some liberal Friends, there are many Quakers out there who, however mistakenly, very much suspect, or at least fear, that the AFSC may in truth be a tool of Moscow. To pretend these sentiments are not there is, in my view, to take an excessively narrow view of American Quakerdom; and to suggest that these views not be dealt with is condescending. I wonder whether several of the inquiries produced by the ad, especially in *Quaker Life*, came from such persons; and if so, whether on reading the issue some may have had their fears eased and their suspicions allayed. I hope so. But would that balance out any possible encouragement of such charges among other readers of the ad only? Again, I wonder.

A Miscellany of Other Missives

There were many other issues addressed by my correspondents through the past year. My piece on the Quaker variety of feminism(#24, 3/83), evoked among other responses a fascinating tale from a Philadelphia Friend about his mother's work with Alice Paul and other pioneering suffragette-feminists. On a different slant, another Marylander explained the likely manner in which one of my "Has Thee Hugged A Quaker Today?" buttons found its way into a Trappist monastery west of Washington D.C. (It turns out these monks have had numerous Quaker contacts; perhaps they're even a "Quaker front group!") There were also two or three very apologetic notes from subscribers who were not renewing, because of financial pressures or lack of reading time. These were very touching; an editor more often expects to hear from the irate readers who have had enough--and I got a couple of those, too.

The other topic which drew a spate of letters was #23, 2/83, on the controversy over whether discussion of homosexuality will be allowed at the Friends United Meeting Triennial next year in California. A former official of California Yearly Meeting, which is hosting the gathering and pressing for the proscription, wrote to say he felt "the article will not be helpful" to anyone involved. On the other hand, a well-informed Friend from Richmond, Indiana said the piece was "right on target," and that therefore "some Friends are going to be very upset." This is a matter, like many others, which is as yet unresolved, and which has been reported on only in these pages. Hence readers may be hearing about it again--as I, no doubt, will hear about it, and many other things, from you in the months to come.

INSIDE: ANNUAL FEEDBACK ISSUE--
READERS TALK BACK TO
A FRIENDLY LETTER



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

THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

It was late in this month, 1656, when James Nayler was arrested in Devonshire England and thrown in the Exeter gaol. Nayler was then one of the leading public ministers among Friends; some have even argued that his prestige rivalled or surpassed that of George Fox. It could be, because not long before his imprisonment, Nayler had been the object of several outbursts of messianic enthusiasm among some women Friends, who had hailed him as if he was a returning Messiah. It was a time when such feeling was running high, and had concrete political implications. The Fifth Monarchy Men, one such group, believed that if they blew up Parliament and murdered government officials, they could bring on the Millenium and Christ's return. The discovery of their plot in 1661 set off a wave of persecution in which Friends were included. Nayler, tragically, was carried away with this sentiment, and became the center of early Quakerism's major internal setback. By the end of the year, when Fox visited Nayler in prison, Nayler was so full of his delusions that he treated Fox very rudely. Nayler went on to suffer horrible tortures for his "blasphemy," then finally recover his balance, become reconciled to Friends, and die a lonely but redemptive death.

QUAKER CHUCKLES

Here is a potpourri of Yearly Meeting humor:

Overheard in a group of Friends waiting for an elevator: "This elevator runs on Quaker processes: it always gets you to the right place, but it often takes forever to get there."

Overheard in a weighty discussion of alcohol and temperance: One Friend asked, "But does this issue really get to the heart of our life as a religious community?" Another Friend replied, "maybe not, but it at least gets as far as the liver."

A handmade slogan seen on a lapel: "Some things thee has to see to believe. But some things thee has to believe to see."

Some Doggerel minutes prepared by a whimsical recording clerk, after a weighty session dealing with issues of temperance and sexuality:

Now my friends, don't get in stews,
We needn't agonize on booze.
Liquor shall not touch your lips,
While on Yearly Meeting trips.
But if you still should like the juice,
On your neck we'll place no noose.
While it's love we talk about,
What makes Quakers scream and shout?
Things are getting quite complex

For committees thrashing sex.
That which starts with hug and kiss
Doesn't always lead to bliss.
But with Friendly love we know
Unity will grow and grow.
If you think that sex and booze
Give us too much funny news,
Stick around, you won't get vexed,
Or be surprised by what comes next.