

The Inlook-Outlook Letter
Of the Prison Ministry of the St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
Potsdam, NY (February 2011)

This 'Inlook-Outlook Letter' is for you, to let you know you are in our hearts and prayers. When we *look into* our hearts we see God and this benefits our *outlook*.

Discouragement

My trust does not fail even when I say, 'I am completely wretched'. In my terror I said, 'No human being can be relied on' (Psalm 116)

No emotion is more human or more common than discouragement. For the man and woman in prison this may especially be true dealing with the frustrations and limitations of living in an institution. Psalm 116 is a Psalm of thanksgiving, for having relied on God, even when the Psalmist felt “completely wretched” or that “no human being could be relied on”, his trust in God did not fail to get results. Make no mistake about it! A religious or spiritual life is about getting results!

The Psalmist reminds us that it is natural for men and women to feel this way when life presents us with difficulties. When we are discouraged, we do not beat ourselves up. We say to ourselves, “This is discouragement; this is what it feels like, and it is human to feel this way”. “I accept my feelings; let them wash over me and dissipate into the ground around me as a million little drops of water. Now that they are absorbed by God's good earth, I can let them go and act, I can do something about them.” What can I do?

First, I can pray for guidance (but what if someone says, “I don't really believe prayer works or that anybody is really listening?”). No matter. The nice thing about our relationship with God is you don't have to believe anything for now. All you have to do is do it! This is called 'being faithful', or as the saying goes: “Suit up and show up”. It is good to believe, but it is not as important as hope and love says St. Paul (1 Corinthians 13: 13). However, for skeptics (like me) here is an amazing bit of scientific 'proof' that prayer works:

In a large social survey two questions were asked of participants: 1) What do you do when you feel discouraged or disheartened? And 2) Of the things you do in answer to question 1, which have you found is the most effective?

In answer to question 1, prayer was only number 8 on a list of the 10 most common things people do about discouragement. However, in answer to question 2, 'prayer' was #1 in the list of things people reported as being effective! Prayer works! We may not know why it works; it doesn't matter; the fact is, it does!

Second, we can share our discouragement with others we trust. These could be members of our faith community, a priest or minister on staff we like, or a friend. The Psalmist trusts God and also God's communications *witnessed by his people* (Psalm 116: 14). A relationship with others is not easy Eldridge Cleaver says, *it takes time and deeds, and this involves trust, it involves making ourselves naked, to become sitting ducks for each other.*

Recently, an inmate Friend *became a sitting duck* as he shared his anxiety about parole. He is feeling discouraged; this will be his third, and he has seen so many others through the years who have been

turned down time and again; many have become bitter and hopeless. He doesn't want to end up like this. Can we blame him?

What can we do when we find ourselves in a situation like this? 1) Put an imaginary 'stop sign' up in your mind when you find yourself 'worrying' and tell yourself, 'I am not going there right now'. 'I can go there tomorrow, but today I will not go there'. It is best not to worry at all Jesus says: *Can any of you, however much you worry, add one single cubit to your span of life?...So do not worry about tomorrow: tomorrow will take care of itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own* (Matthew 6: 27-34). The problem with worrying is that it is a mental activity that takes vital energy but does not really do anything real for us; in fact it likely breeds other bad thoughts, and a downward spiral begins.

2) Seek God's guidance. A.S.K.: **Ask** and it will be given you; **Search**, and you will find; **Knock** and the door will be opened to you (Matthew 7: 7).

Ask means to make yourself receptive to God's guidance, perhaps in silence, for God already knows your dilemma and what you need.

Search refers to *waiting* and *watching* for God's guidance as did the prophets of old (See Psalm 130); be patient, be open and vigilant; the answer may not come immediately, but it will come, often when you are least expecting it.

Knock implies a door before you; by knocking you are signaling your willingness to accept God's answer, and to go through into a new stage in your life; the door is a sign of impending transformation and renewal; by knocking you are not just barging in, but humbly acknowledging the responsibility you will have to assume once you enter this new place where your answer is; you have decided you are willing to take on what is asked of you. Furthermore, rest assured it *will be opened to you*, you will be given the power to do what God asks of you. Early Quakers spoke of the direct Word of God as an 'opening'. It is often said in Quaker circles today that are struggling with a problem: "Way will open".

3) Do one thing towards dealing with the problem. One cannot control the parole board, but one man took this step before his parole meeting: On one side of a piece of paper, he wrote goals he wanted to accomplish on the *outside* in the first year of parole. On the other side of the same piece of paper, he wrote out goals of things he would accomplish in the next year on the *inside*, were he not granted parole. After his parole meeting, he would cross out one side of the piece of paper (whichever it was) and set out to accomplish his goals. This way, no matter how the parole meeting went, he had something to look forward to.

May God bless you. **Anybody who wishes to receive the 'Inlook-Outlook Letter' may request a subscription by writing to the address below.** Be sure to let us know your complete address. You will be put on our mailing list and receive a monthly copy at no cost. Also, please feel free to write us with your comments, suggestions and contributions to the Letter: **St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting, P.O. Box 292, Canton, NY 13617**

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