

The Inlook-Outlook Letter

Of the Prison Ministry of the St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
Potsdam, NY (February 2010)

As so many of our prison members and attenders have been taken far from us or otherwise are unable to attend our prison meeting, we at St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting compose this 'Inlook-Outlook Letter' for you, to let you know you are in our hearts and prayers and will always be so. When we *look into* our hearts we see God and this benefits our *outlook*. This edition is about the theme 'What should I get out of religion?'

What Should I get Out of Religion?

It is normal in the everyday world to ask 'What's in it for me?' A lot of the decisions we make on a day to day basis involve this kind of thinking. And there is nothing wrong with this. In fact, it is good to think this way, because in doing so we are able to care for ourselves. However, if we only think this way, what do we become? If we are always thinking 'What's in it for me?' we are basically following only our own instincts in everything. The more our life is made up only of this kind of thinking, the more isolated we become, because we are operating only on our own resources; the effect in the long run is loneliness and with it unbearable anxiety. In fact it is impossible to find happiness if we are the only resource we have. We find that everything is taken away from us eventually.

So, what do we do to get away from this isolation? We turn to others. A proverb says: "Shared joy is double joy, shared sorrow, half sorrow". What a joy it is to share with others our sorrows and our joys. We know we have a true friend, when we find someone who listens to us without judging, who hears what we are saying and who is more likely to share his experience around what we are saying, rather than trying to 'fix' us.

When we turn to others we find two things that exercise us: 1) Our friend will always have a different perspective on things than we do. This is because every human being is unique in their biological makeup and their life experience. Human beings taken together are like a beautiful quilt, all different colors and patterns, but that is what makes the quilt beautiful! Our friend's perspective allows us an opportunity to take his perspective and try it on so to speak, for ourselves. Sometimes we can accept his perspective, at other times we cannot. Thus friendship is giving and receiving, and taking what we like and leaving what does not work for us without comment or judgment. 2) The second thing that exercises us in having a close relationship with someone is the faculty of 'sympathy' and its ally, 'compassion'. We can stretch ourselves and try to understand how he feels, even though he may be discussing matters that make us uncomfortable. What sorts of things might make us uncomfortable? I have found that invariably when people try to communicate about death or loss, it is always uncomfortable.

I'll give you an example. Some years ago I was visiting my hometown after many years of absence and was informed that a childhood friend's teen-age son had recently committed suicide. I went to see her, but said nothing about her son's death. Instead we engaged in small talk, though I could see she was very distressed. I have ever since regretted the opportunity to have brought some connection and comfort into her life at that time, and it haunts me. Why did I fail? Because I only thought about my own comfort; if I had said anything, I am sure it would have meant a great deal to her, but I chose not

to.

The wonderful thing about having a religious or spiritual life, is that we can relax our thinking about 'What's in it for me?' . We can escape from the prison of our childish need to be comfortable. In fact here is a paradox, the truth of which is backed by modern research in the behavioral sciences: People who engage in religion without hope of any kind of personal gain (called by scientists *intrinsically religious*) are happier, psychologically and physically more healthy, and live longer, than people who engage in religion hoping to get something out of it (called by scientists *extrinsically religious*). Do you see the joke here? What science is showing in these studies is that if you engage in religion expecting to get nothing out of it, you are more likely to get more out of it! In contrast if you only seek 'What's in it for me' you get no real life at all!

Religion is something to engage in simply because we come to realize it is the right thing to do. We seek a friend, the greatest friend we could ever find, God. Religion is the engagement in relationship, with God, with fellow-believers, with our innermost self, a self we would never know about otherwise. We reach into the depths and find there a person we never imagined ourselves could be. Suddenly we have gifts we did not know we had. *For to everyone who has, will be given more...but anyone who has not, will be deprived even of what he has*, says Jesus in Matthew 25: 29. What in heaven's name is he talking about? He is talking about being truly engaged with God. When we encounter God (and we can never be sure when that happens, so don't seek assurance or proof, however, paradoxically we will always be certain about the encounter in our own minds, though we may not be able to explain it to others) we change our lives of self-destructive behaviors and become instead healers like Jesus, healers of the world's woes; and we will be given more. We will know more, we will be happier, and we will be able to do things we would have never been able to do before our transformation, because we will be given the resources to do them. This is how and why religion works and why religious organizations persist in history.

We may ask ourselves some questions. Am I truly taking care of myself, by letting go of the burdensome need to always see what I can get out of something, before I commit to doing it? Do I take time out of my busy daily schedule to seek God's guidance? Today can I escape from prison for a time by serving others in some way? Do I have the courage to accept real relationship in my life, taking without judgment the perspectives of other people and trying them on for size? Today do I sympathize with others, especially those are giving me a hard time, in order to grow into an attitude of compassion away from the poison of judgment?

May God bless you always. **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: **St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting, P.O. Box 292 , Canton, NY 13617.**

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