

The Inlook-Outlook Letter

Of the Prison Ministry of the St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
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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*.

My Favorite Sport: Sin!

Let's draw an analogy between 'sin' and 'sports'. An 'analogy' is a comparison we make in order to see and understand something better, in this case 'sin'. When we look at the meaning of 'sin', we find it means 'missing the mark'. This brings to mind the sport of archery, or any sport in which we must hit a target. This could include any throwing skill, like a quarterback making a perfect throw to a wide receiver, or a fielder throwing a ball with precision for an 'out' at first base. For now, I will stick with the archery analogy.

Many of us may have been brought up to believe that 'sin' means something bad I have done. Perhaps, but it is more. When we understand 'sin' to be 'missing the mark', it takes on new meaning. Instead of 'bad', we have an image of an archer (us) who is *unskilled* and has missed the target. The arrow may be just to one side of a bulls eye, or perhaps it has flown past altogether and is somewhere in the woods behind! In other words we can be close (less damaging action) or way off (a lot of work to do to make it up). The point is we are *unskilled*. To sin is to be *unskilled*.

How does one become better at a sport? It takes two things: A teacher (coach) and practice. One teacher is Jesus or the Holy Spirit. George Fox, the 17th century leader of the Quakers said *The Lord will teach his people himself*. Revelation continues! God can and will speak to us directly right now! Another teacher might be a minister or priest we trust, or a member of our faith community. We may find a teacher in a wise person whose writings inspire us. The stories in the Bible continue to teach us. We need someone; and we also need to *practice*, to get better at a sport. All the listening and the reading in the world will avail us nothing, if we do not *practice* what we have learned.

It is important to remember that everyone is born *unskilled*. No one escapes. In the Christian tradition, this condition is called 'original sin'. Some of us are fortunate, and get the skills we need to cope with life's challenges as we grow up. Others of us are not so fortunate; society and family life have not been as generous to us as they might have been, and we do not have some necessary skills to cope. When we grow in our life-skills, our ability to cope, it is called becoming mature. We grow up. It is easy to grow up physically; that's given, however, it is not so easy to grow up psychologically and spiritually. All the religious traditions encourage their believers to 'grow up'. If a religious tradition is not helping people to grow up, it is not doing its job.

In the Christian tradition, thinking of Jesus' sacrifice for us on the cross perhaps, St. Paul describes the right path to maturity: *offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, dedicated and acceptable to God; that is the kind of worship for you as sensible people. Do not model your behavior on the contemporary world, but let the renewing of your minds transform you, so that you may discern for yourselves what is the will of God-what is good and acceptable and mature* (Romans 12: 1-2). St. Paul says that learning life-skills (*renewing of your minds*), becoming better archers, thus transforming us (growing up), is what actual worship is; it isn't just sitting in church on Sunday!

Sometimes we learn bad habits, unskilled ways of coping or dealing with challenges. As an example, one such habit I learned was to think that *everything should be easy*. This sounds irrational, and it is! I believe this came about because I was thrust into too much responsibility as a youngster; I was asked to do things beyond what children should be. This belief comes out of a feeling of 'overwhelmed' all the time as a child in an absent-father situation.

Thus, part of our becoming more skilled in the sport of life is to identify 'bad habits' of thinking ('stinking thinking') we may have learned as children, replacing them with others that work for us. St. Paul put it this way: *When I was a child I used to talk like a child, and see things as a child does, and think like a child; but now that I have become an adult, I have finished with all childish ways* (1 Corinthians 13: 11). Paul goes on to describe what being an adult, yet still thinking like a child feels like: It's like seeing things through a mirror instead of *face-to-face*, to being confronted with *mere riddles* all the time instead of real knowledge. But when we grow, he says, *we shall know just as fully as I am myself known* [by a loving and merciful God] (13: 12).

One way to identify bad habits of thinking is to keep a journal and write down our experiences each day. Examine what went right and what went wrong. Talk about what you have learned with your coach. This is one way to *renew our minds*, to learn about ourselves, to become more skilled, and to help us *know what is good and acceptable and mature* (Romans 12: 2).

February Is Black History Month

Bayard Rustin (1912-1987)

Bayard Rustin, a Quaker, is one of my great heroes. He was a leader in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1940's, '50's and beyond. He brought the idea of non-violent, peaceful resistance as a way to achieve civil rights goals into the campaign of Martin Luther King, Jr. Always close to Dr. King, he and A. Philip Randolph, Jr. organized the March on Washington in 1963 (both are on the cover of *Life* magazine, Sept. 6th 1963). His writings are in: *Time on two crosses: the collected writings of Bayard Rustin* San Francisco: [Cleis Press](#), 2003. He was jailed numerous times, for civil and gay rights. Imagine! A gay rights activist in the 1940's. What a courageous man!



1964

Rustin with civil rights activists before a demonstration,

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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