

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

Mothers

Ernest Borgnine, 94, will be awarded the Screen Actor's guild Lifetime Achievement Award this year. When asked in a recent interview how he got into acting, he said it was his mother's idea. After the war, he didn't want to work in a factory and she said to him "You always like getting in front of people and making a fool of yourself, why don't you give it a try?" He then saw what he refers to as "this light". His mother's words jolted him into a revelation. It occurred to me, our mothers have the power to confer status upon us suddenly like this.

As a young man, my mom once said to me, "Never forget your Irish sense of humor!" Up to that point I didn't know I had an "Irish sense of humor", but from that day on, I knew I did! My mom didn't say, "You know, your ancestors were Irish, and the Irish have a great sense of humor, maybe you've got that too." What she said to me was a certainty, she conferred upon me in that moment 'an Irish sense of humor'. Whenever the chips are down, I always remember what she said.

Mothers are a powerful influence on men (and women too). The power can have good and bad aspects. Sometimes when mothers find themselves raising children alone, the 'man of the family' syndrome can occur. This happened to me. I became my mother's keeper in certain respects. We are supposed to be our brother's keeper (Genesis 4.9), God tells us in the story of Cain and Abel, but it does not say we are to be our mother's keeper!

How we are to treat our parents is given by the fifth commandment of The Ten: *Honor your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land Yahweh, your God, is giving you* (Exodus 20.12). The elders were the repositories of wisdom in a nomadic society like that of the ancient Jews, whose traditions were passed down orally from generation to generation. My mother, for example, passed on the wisdom of humor to me this way. The elders were thus given special status, which presumably included care in their old age. Only with their wisdom, could we hope to live long lives and continue the generations of the covenant.

But think about this: A child can give this kind of care and take on this responsibility at the proper age, only if he himself has grown up with all the tools of the adult. Thus, implied in this commandment, though perhaps hidden from us at first glance, is that the parent must have fulfilled his and her obligations for the care and raising of the child. The child must be 'grown up' in order to assume his responsibilities as a contributing member of adult society.

When we children become our mother's 'keeper', we may find it harder to grow into men and women (for women I suspect we often become our 'father's keeper'): A responsibility has been given us before

we are ready for it! A small child should not have to care for its parent; the parent is supposed to care for the child until such time as it is appropriate to let go; and then, at that time, to encourage them to make the step into man- or woman-hood.

When I became “the man of the house” after my father left us, I was still a youngster. That implied ominous responsibilities, and that I should know what these are. All my life I have felt I should know how to do things automatically and was ashamed of failure. This led me to a life in which I rarely asked for help. When a very small child 'plays' he or she has time to try out life in a context that is not so serious, so the skills grow slowly without a weight of responsibility. Later, the child assumes more and more responsibility, but gradually, and with the aid of supportive adults.

In the Christian faith a wonderful mother-model is Mary, mother of Jesus. She must have been a good mother, but perhaps like most mothers, she had trouble letting go; at one point she says in exasperation of her son, *He is out of his mind!* (Mark 3.21). At another, the disciples interrupt his teaching to tell him his mother and brothers are at the door and wish to speak to him; Jesus ignores them saying, *Who are my mother and my brothers?* He then looks at the faithful he is teaching and says, *Here are my mother and my brothers* (Mark 3.33-34) . In the end, Mary accepts the new Jesus her son has become, she lets go of him so to speak, and it is clear both she and some of his brothers eventually become his disciples (John 19.25). The son has become the mother's teacher, because the mother was a teacher for the son!

The situation of being the man of the house may breed resentment as we try to do our best on meager resources. I had a residual anger towards my mother through much of my life. In the end, like Mary, Jesus' mother, I was able to accept my mom for who she was and not as I wanted her to be. I let go of the resentment and found myself suddenly saying to her at the end of a phone conversation, *I love you*. It was first time I had said those words to her. Much to my surprise, she said, *I love you too*. Some months later she died unexpectedly. I was very glad I had said those words when I did.

Some Queries:

- 1) Today, how may I grow closer to members of my family and be a teacher for them?
- 2) Who are my mothers and my brothers and how can they help me grow into the person I want to be?

May 8th is Mother's Day. May you and your family be blest!

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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