

The Inlook-Outlook Letter

Of the Prison Ministry of the St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
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St. Lawrence Valley Friends 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 issue looks at "Our Other Life".

Our Other Life

(Sometimes I go about pitying myself, and all the time I am being carried on great winds across the sky-Ojibway)

The Ojibway (Chippewa) are the third largest native American nation in the U.S. I like the above saying from their tradition, because it suggests how all of us, no matter what cultural background we come from, share the common human condition. We are naturally self-centered and are thus prone to pitying ourselves when things don't go the way we expect them to. And yet, the Ojibway recognize that there is a whole other life, so to speak, out there that we are unaware of most of the time. We are being carried across the sky on great winds, they say. Something invisible is carrying us. The wind is often a metaphor for the Holy Spirit in the Judeo-Christian faith tradition. "Ruah" for example is a Hebrew word for 'breath', meaning 'spirit'. Breath is something unseen yet essential for life.

What is this "other life", and what are we to do about it? This other life I would propose, is our true life, the one we are supposed to be living, but often get distracted from because we seem to pay more attention to what is happening immediately in front of us and are distracted constantly trying to deal with that. We get side-tracked so to speak, and never get on with what God desires of us. It is because our emotions get in the way, stinking thinking starts (such as "Why me?"). God is infinitely patient we are told by Rabbi Jesus and carries us toward our destiny unbeknownst to us. But we have to wake up and notice, for time is finite; our lives will eventually run their course, and then we will have no more time to live the life we were sent here to live.

I can imagine no other group in the U.S. that has to be more aware of the importance of time and its passing in a person's life, than is the man and woman in prison. In fact, the act of being imprisoned is called "doing time". How are we doing our time? When we get stuck in our emotions (and emotion is often merely the action of stress molecules in our body as a result of our imagination thinking all sorts of unhelpful things), it is hard to think creatively and helpfully.

Please understand I am not suggesting that emotions are 'bad'. The emotions are there to tell us what is going on; they come with God's creation; therefore they are good when they keep us safe and up-to-date with our surroundings. When there is danger, they inform us so we can protect ourselves. When there is joy, we can relax with our fellows and share a joke or a cookie! They only become a problem when we stir them up without reason, which happens for example when we begin to pity ourselves. What can we do about this and how can we get to our other, true life where joy is forever (the early Christians called this "eternal life") to where God is carrying us across the sky?

The following are two things I thought about that we can do to move with the wind and not against it!

First, if we are having 'bad' thoughts, things that stir us up to anger and anxiety, we can call a halt! When these moments happen to me, I imagine putting up a red "Stop"-sign. At first, this tactic doesn't

seem to work so well, but I have found if I do it consistently and faithfully, eventually the troubling thoughts start to fade and go away almost entirely. They pop-up of course at unexpected times, when I least expect it, but I just get out the stop-sign again when they do!

Second, the 12-step program 11th step says *We sought through prayer and meditation to increase our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out.* This step is the one that helps us get in touch with that force that is carrying us along. When we are carried, something or someone is *standing under* us and lifting us up, in other words we are *understood*; we are *loved*.

Spend time in prayer and meditation (meditation is silent prayer-we wait in expectant love and watchfulness). I like the wording of step #11: We are to seek *conscious* contact; implies we will know something has changed in us; we will be conscious of and therefore will be comforted by this knowledge of the nearness of God and its result: something has changed inside us. We are to step into God's circle, which by the way is always next to us. We are to invite and include God in our conscious life.

It tells us also what to pray for; it is very simple: *knowledge of God's will for us*, nothing more. God already knows what we need; we don't have to tell God we would like the parole board to make a favorable decision, or that we need a car or a computer, or any other thing. God already knows. We pray for opening to God's guidance for us; what God desires for us that we cannot see at the moment.

The words also say we pray for *the power to carry that out.* This statement means we will need power, courage, to carry out what God asks of us. Usually what we need is to grow out of old bad habits into new, better ones, and this may be hard. We don't want to give up our old ways so easily. Like an old pair of shoes we've gotten accustomed to them, and we may not want to throw them out, even though they leak when it rains and get our socks dirty with dust when it doesn't.

It is painful to grow up, because we adult men have to admit first of all, that we have not grown up yet (entirely). I like to think of myself as an adult, yet I can throw a childish fit in an instant! The people who live with me know that better than anyone. When my dog sees me sitting down to type at the computer, he vacates the room. I may later hear my wife playfully asking me from somewhere in the house where she has heard my outburst, "Now, what are you @#*%\$@#^& about?" "Oh", I usually answer, "it's this computer". Once I swore at the computer and in response, suddenly all the work I was doing was deleted! Watch out! Our emotional state can affect the machines we work with. How much more do they affect the people we love who live with us and depend on us?

The thought that I am being carried across the sky, despite appearances to the contrary, gives me great comfort. It means I have a destiny. We may ask ourselves: What is my destiny? What is it of God's work I am to carry out that suits my particular temperament and talents? What new talents and powers must I develop to stretch myself towards true life, and what resources exist to pursue them where I am now?

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 to the Letter: **St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting, P.O. Box 292, Canton, NY 13617.**

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