

The Inlook-Outlook Letter

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

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*.

This month's edition features one of the Quaker testimonies: Simplicity (below). This fits right in with a letter we received recently from an inmate member who asked us to write about "What is a Quaker?" He says he would like us to address this question, because it seems he gets a lot of blank stares when he tells others he is a Quaker. They naturally want to know who are the Quakers and what do they believe?

The short answer is that Quakers have only one very simple belief: There is that of God within each of us, a spark of the divine light, which is available to us 24 hours a day. All else that we believe and do stems from this spiritual fact. For example, we usually have no professional ministry in our meetings as the Divine law in each of us requires us to minister as moved. The best way to worship is to become still and wait and watch for divine guidance of the Light within and to share it with the community when we discern appropriate. Quakers have developed a set of testimonies that are ways in which they put their faith in the Divine Light within into practice.

Thus, Friends (Quakers) are a religious society not so much concerned with *belief* as they are with *practice*. How are we to live given our belief in God, our love of God, and the dwelling of God within us as witnessed in the life and teachings of Jesus? The Quaker testimonies are guides to put our faith into practice. There is no set number, but the following would be typical: Truth or Integrity, Peace, Simplicity, Care of the Gifts of the Creation, Equality and Community (Service in what St. Paul called God's *saving justice*--See his Letter to the Romans). In future we will address other aspects of our faith and practice; this month we start with "Simplicity."

Simplicity

One of the core Quaker testimonies is "Simplicity." What does this mean? It's not as simple as it sounds!

While Quakers are urged not to covet material goods, "to live simply" does not necessarily mean to go without. In today's world, to go without a car might seem simple on the surface, but it can create great complications when it comes time to run an errand, get to work or an appointment, or go to Quaker Meeting. To abandon electricity could make daily living very difficult.

The call to simplicity is not a negative; it is not about self-denial. It is a positive; it's about having, not about *not* having. For it is more about relationships, not things. The simpler a relationship, whether with God, with a family member or with any other person, the better its chance of success.

The Quaker relationship with God is simple. No one stands between, explaining what God is saying to us, or what His words mean. That can lead to misinterpretation, and that gets complicated. Instead, our line of communication to God is direct, uninterrupted and constant – in other words, simple! And so

we adhere to a simple form of worship, where nothing disrupts our open road to God's word. We gather in expectant, attentive silence, waiting quietly for God to send us messages. When he does, we share them if we feel so inspired. What could be simpler than that?

But what about our relationships here on Earth? One Quaker teaching is to be forthright and honest in our interaction with others, be they loved ones, friends and acquaintances, or complete strangers. When we are this way, our relationship is simple – it is not cluttered with unnecessary baggage. But when we introduce lies and deceit and dissembling into a relationship, it becomes more and more complicated. Lies beget other lies, and drag in others, and cause distrust among all involved, and that often leads to even more lies and contrived attempts to explain away one's words or behavior. The cycle of consequences is hard to break – it gets very complicated! But honesty is simple. Trust is simple.

In other words, in relationships, apply the Golden Rule, which is exquisite in its simplicity: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Or, as stated in the book of Micah (6:8), as paraphrased by the Quaker writer Howard Macy in his book *Stepping in the Light*, "It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, [and] be compassionate and loyal in your love."

Quakers are fond of Gandhi's saying that we should "Live simply so that others may simply live." While giving up our car may not save another's life (it may in fact put an auto worker out of work, which would certainly not simplify his life!), we can go gently on our planet, conserving resources so others who are not as fortunate as we can have their share. We need shelter, but not the biggest, fanciest house imaginable, with all the latest gadgets and pompous accessories. Nor do we need to live a great many miles from work, forcing a costly commute. We can consume local food to the extent possible, allowing the energy devoted to shipping food to exotic markets to go toward helping the hungry have food, period – so they can simply live.

There's much more to it than can be captured in one short essay. How would you propose to follow the testimony of simplicity? Here are some queries, adapted from Howard Macy's book:

1. Many people understand simplicity as dealing mostly with money and possessions. How might that change if we were to follow the Quaker abolition leader John Woolman's advice to "pay steady attention to the voice of the true shepherd," the central guide to simplicity?
2. Some people claim that outward practice of simplicity grows out of inner transformation. Others teach that outward practices can bring inner transformation. How is each of these approaches helpful?
3. In what ways does our daily experience challenge the desire for simplicity?
4. Some who practice simplicity witness to its being a way of freedom and joy rather than cramped constraint and deprivation. What would cause them to say this?
5. And what can you say?

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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