

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

Preparing Heart and Mind

Sometimes the silence of Quaker worship can be daunting. It can be overwhelming, or boring, or both. How should one approach this time of open worship? The Quaker Advices and Queries say you should "prepare your heart and mind," but what does that mean, and how do you do it?

Ideally, the silence in Meeting provides a space in which you come into contact with "that of God within you," but in reality it is not so easy to find God. You might instead find restlessness, spinning thoughts, or worry. You might suddenly notice physical discomfort or hear your stomach growling or you might even start dozing off. You might simply wonder what you are supposed to be thinking about.

The truth is, no matter what you think or feel, God is there with you, holding you in the light of Love, waiting and hoping that you will eventually notice.

It's okay if you don't know what to do, but there are some meditation techniques that can be helpful.

I often start by thinking about each person in the room, one at a time, "holding them in the Light," which means wishing them well, or praying for their well-being. I think about God being present for all of us, and try to feel God's presence, gathering us all together to bathe in the Light of God's love.

Sometimes I then also pray for specific people who are not present, but who I know are going through their own struggles.

Starting with holding others in the Light like this can lead to one of my favorite kinds of meditation, called the "compassion meditation." What you do in this meditation is first think of someone you like or love or admire, and think about what you so like about that person, and then hold that person in the Light.

Next (and this can be hard!), you do the same for yourself! Think about how God loves you, and try to see why God loves you. Hold yourself in the Light!

Now do this for someone you don't know very well, and don't really have any feelings for, positive or negative: someone just there in your life, but you don't really notice very much. Think about what that person's life might be like. Hold that person in the Light.

Finally, think of someone you have struggles with. Yes, this is hard, but: remember that God loves that person too! Try to see why. Even if you have trouble seeing how God can love that person, hold him or her in the Light too! There is the potential for goodness even in that person's soul. Can you catch glimpses of that? If so, your noticing gives strength to that goodness. But even if you cannot see that goodness, know that it is there and that God sees it. By holding the person in the light, you help to open the door to the possibility that that person's best self can emerge and start to shine.

There is a passage in a famous philosophy writing (*The Republic*, by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato) in which the characters discuss what justice is. One of them says that justice is doing good for your friends, and harming your enemies. The other characters seem to like this definition, but the philosopher Socrates questions it. He asks the others to consider what "harm" means. "Doesn't it mean to make something or someone worse?" The others agree. Then Socrates asks, "Well, why would you want to

make your enemies *worse* human beings?" implying that that just makes them better at being bad! You don't really want your enemies better at being bad, do you? So, Socrates concludes that "it is never just to harm anyone." The others are astonished, but eventually they agree with Socrates that it is never just to harm anyone.

I think about this when I do the compassion meditation, and realize that I agree with Socrates. I would rather not have enemies. I want them to see the error of their ways and to apologize. I would rather mend my relationship with them through reconciliation than give them more reasons to hate me or treat me badly. And sometimes, when I think about why they are treating me badly, I realize that maybe, from their point of view, they feel they have good reasons. If they have misunderstood me, maybe it is partly my responsibility. Maybe I have not communicated very well with them.

In the compassion meditation, sometimes I come to understand them better, and myself better, and realize what I need to do to try to heal the relationship. I cannot make them understand or make them apologize, or make them change in any way. But I can change my own attitude towards them, and my behavior towards them. Quakerism reminds me that I should be "answering to that of God in everyone." I see this as looking for any sign of goodness in their soul, and responding to that. I try to strengthen the goodness in them, and in myself.

Later in *The Republic*, Socrates also points out that it is easy for us to focus on what is wrong. We are problem-solving creatures. Our attention is seized powerfully by what we don't like, what scares us, and what angers us. But the truly wise person, says Socrates, looks for and is able to perceive what is truly good. Sometimes there are only wisps of goodness. The wise person catches them, though, and by noticing them, is able to bring them out and give them strength. The wise person sees an angry person, and knows that behind the anger there is caring and concern, because no one who truly doesn't care would bother to get all angry. The unwise person might feel frightened by anger and get angry back, but the wise person reaches through the anger to the care and asks, "why do you care? What do you need?" The wise person reaches through problems and asks, "what would be a good solution?" The wise person lives from positives, instead of negatives.

Above all, in Meeting, I try to let go of all the negativity that has accumulated within me, and re-tune my soul towards living from positives again, looking for signs of goodness wherever they may be, and bringing God's love into the world through how I live my own life. It is not always easy, but it is in Meeting that I remind myself to keep trying.-*Laura Rediehs*

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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