

The Inlook-Outlook Letter

Of the Prison Ministry of the St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
Potsdam, NY (September 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*. Did you ever wonder what is meant by “God's will”?

Our Will and God's Will

For the trouble is we are self-centered, and no effort of the self can remove the self from the center of its own endeavor- William Temple

As biological beings we are self-centered says William Temple (above), and when our life is chaotic, no effort on our part can remove us from our self-inflicted dilemma. We need help from some source outside ourselves. In all spiritual traditions that consists of two things: a higher power, God, and a loving, faithful community.

Why are we selfish? Selfishness is part of the creation, which God saw was good (Genesis 1). It would look pretty bad for us if we were not! We would be missing arms, hands, legs and eyes; we would be burned and sore with all kinds of injuries were it not so. Half of us would be completely blind, the other half with head injuries so severe we could not think. In short, without selfishness we would not survive. *Everything is born with the instinct to look after itself*. Our bodies are temples of God. St. Paul tells us (1 Cor 6:19) what could be more important than this, to take care of the dwelling place of God?

The same sentiment is expressed in Judaism by Hillel, a rabbi who lived nearly at the same time as Jesus: *If I am not for myself, who will be for me?* He asks. The answer to his question I believe, is “no one”. However, the problem with self-attention is that we can become captivated by it and think it is the only way. Hillel understood this by adding a second query: *If I am only for myself, then what am I?* The answer is again, I believe, “no one”. We must take care of ourselves yes, but that is not all, we have a responsibility towards others too. And in case in our pride we forget that we are mortal, Hillel adds a third query: *If not now, when?* When are we going to let go of our self-centeredness and live in a more balanced way, a way in which we are able to care for ourselves as well as the community of God?

I want to point out that it would be wrong to suggest that “our will” is merely our selfishness. We *can* will to do the right thing for example; when we do that ours and God's will are on the same page so to speak.

We may ask how do we know when ours and God's will are in agreement? One example comes from ancient Greece. Socrates, the Greek philosopher was developing his ideas at around the same time the Jewish people were putting together the Old Testament. Socrates said he always felt guided by something inside. Quakers would call this 'something' the “inward light” or “that of God in us”. Socrates didn't profess to believe in God as most of us might understand God today, but felt this inner guide. The interesting thing about his experience, was that the inner guide never told him what to do, rather it told him what *not* to do (Karen Armstrong, The Great Transformation, 2006). If he was doing the right thing, he felt as if everything was alright, but if he started to go down the wrong path, he would be reminded not to go there.

Father James Martin describes a similar experience of the inward guide in his wonderful book The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything (2010), a book on real life spirituality for everyone regardless of religious affiliation.

When Father Martin entered studies to become a Jesuit priest, he was shocked when his spiritual adviser warned him that he would fall in love. How could his mentor suggest such a thing, after all, he would take a vow of celibacy! Sure enough, after some years Father Martin met a person with whom he wished to spend the rest of his life. He prayed about it. Would he leave the priesthood or go on to fulfill his dream of serving Christ? He found that when he thought about his relationship with this person and what his life might be like, he felt a certain discomfort, even though he cared very much about her. On the other hand, when he thought about his dream of being in spiritual service to humanity, he experienced feelings of peace. God leaves us alone when we are doing what we were sent here to do, but warns us when we are veering from that path.

The Garden of Eden story (Genesis 2 & 3) reminds us that human beings at some time became aware that one day we would die and suffering resulted from gaining this knowledge-people became insecure and began to do foolish things. With the knowledge of good and evil, we had a freedom (Free-will) denied other animals, but also a responsibility (God's will). This awful responsibility is what Adam and Eve felt once they acquired this knowledge. Frightened, they covered themselves and hid from God. Ever since, God has been calling us *Where are you?* (Genesis 3: 9). We might prefer to avoid God when we would rather do something we know is not quite right.

By the way, there is no such thing as freedom without responsibility-though many people nowadays seem to have forgotten this. In philosophy the practice of freedom with its inherent responsibility is called "ethics". Ethics frees us to do the right thing, that is to pursue our life goals in a way that is harmless to others as much as is humanly possible. The Garden of Eden story reminds us of our responsibilities. If we do not pay attention to what God wishes for us, our world will disintegrate into the evil of chaos and hurt.

The ministry of Jesus reminds us that the only way out of chaos and hurt is to do the work of God thus overcoming suffering. Some of this "work of God" is to help ourselves grow, as Jesus says, *changing [our] ways and being healed by me* (Matthew 13:15). The other part is helping others to heal by sharing with them what we have learned on our spiritual journeys.

For reflection: Do I endeavor to think and pray about what I am doing at this time and whether I experience peace or irritation about it? Perhaps if I feel irritation, I need to give attention to that and uncover a better path that brings me peace. Do I dedicate time each day to ask for knowledge of God's will for me and the courage to carry that out? If not now, when will I start to change unhelpful attitudes and behaviors into ones that will nourish God's peaceable kingdom on earth?

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.**

The material in this newsletter is not copyrighted and may be reproduced for whatever purpose desired