

The Inlook-Outlook Letter

Of the Prison Ministry of the St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
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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 we ask what does it mean to 'walk the line'?

Walking the Line

Have you noticed in the news media, there are many extremist views nowadays? It is because our society is in the grip of fear in the face of economic recession and war. We are anxious and our anxiety does not let us think. Instead of "walking the line" we slip into extreme views in a desperate search for security. How is it we are so tempted to do this? In part it is because of the way life came into being. Our Central Nervous System (call it the 'CNS') is what we have to perceive the world around us. One might ask whether the "Tree of Knowledge" in the Garden of Eden story is but a symbolic representation of the human CNS, the beginnings of humans getting too smart for their own good (Genesis 2 & 3). The Tree of Knowledge gave us the knowledge of both good *and* evil. The story tells us we have two choices and this reflects the 'double nature' of the CNS.

What is meant by 'double nature'? For example, one cannot comprehend the idea of 'cold' without reference to 'hot', 'dark' without 'light', 'black' without 'white', 'good' without 'evil' and so on. Nothing can be comprehended without its opposite. If it doesn't have an opposite, we cannot *see* it.

Furthermore, even the simplest creature understands its environment this way. The one-celled animal we call the amoeba in its drop of water knows where to go to survive, away from hot spots where it would burn up and away from freeze points where it would perish in the cold! It stays in the mid-range. Every religious tradition in the world says: *live in the middle, avoid extremes and be at peace.*

Not only do the perceptive systems of animals and plants understand their environment this way, but inanimate matter undergoes responses to environmental change in the same way. For example, if you boil water on the stove, it appears to us that the water is *gradually* becoming hotter and hotter. But what is really happening is that the water reaches a certain temperature and stops for a moment, even though the burner underneath is constant. Then, when it gets enough energy, it 'leaps' forward to another (hotter) state. The unit of energy required for the change is called a 'quantum'.

Consider that when human beings decided to invent a thinking machine (the computer), it mimicked the workings of the CNS: Computers are digital ('digital' is another word for 'quantum'), they only use *two* numbers 0 & 1, to accomplish all their calculations!

What has this got to do with our spiritual life? For one thing God does not have an 'opposite'. This is why we cannot comprehend God as we would a table or chair. Another way to put it is that the senses cannot prove the existence of God. You may wonder, wait! What is the opposite of a table? The table is an object with a particular form. It exists so to speak, because we comprehend the form of a 'table' from *experience*. Its opposite is 'not table'. So, yes in recognizing a table for what it is our CNS does so by separating it out from things that are not tables, such as chairs for example.

The uniqueness of God is expressed in the Judeo-Christian tradition in the the first of the Ten

Commandments: *You shall have no other gods before me* (Exodus 20: 3). In other words, one should not place anything before God with which God can be compared. Instead we are to nurture a *relationship* with God by faithfully following God's commandments and seeking God's guidance in all our affairs.

“Walking the line” means staying in the middle between the extremes as we pass through life. The region either side of the line is where *temptation* reigns. The line is where we dwell, like the amoeba, but we can be thrown over to one extreme or the other at the drop of a hat. What happens when we do? Like the amoeba we die, not necessarily literally, though that can happen too, but part of us dies, our *humanity*.

This is where all the *isms* and other evils happen: Racism, sexism, classism, ageism, ethnocentrism, fundamentalism and the like.

As an example, we naturally take pride in our cultural and ethnic background. Each of the world cultures has a unique beauty that can teach other cultures and nations important lessons learned on life's journey. It is right we should know and respect the history of our people. However, when we do not feel good about ourselves and lack a relationship with God, who can help us, we feel necessarily alone, and may seek security in something we see as bigger and more powerful than us. We could for example begin to see our identity in the race/ethnic or religious group to which we belong. We may begin to feel that others not like us are suspect. In our minds we become separated from them, we tend to label them and may develop bad feelings about them. We have slipped over the *line* to satisfy our feelings of security and find ourselves separated from others who we now see as 'opposite'.

When we find ourselves slipping over the line, there is something we can do about it. We can learn more about ourselves by living a life of self-examination. This is what all religions teach. A sage once said, *The unexamined life is not worth living*. Self-examination puts the focus on us, and takes it off some other we may be tempted to blame. Quakers have what they call “advices and queries” to help us with self-examination, and some examples of these can be found in the Quaker Faith and Practice book. And you may come up with queries of your own, like these:

- 1) Do I answer that of God in every person I meet first, overlooking any social, religious and cultural differences with which I may be uncomfortable?
- 2) Do I avoid judging a group, by the misguided actions of a few?
- 3) Do I endeavor to learn more about others in order to understand them better?
- 4) Do I take responsibility for my own feelings at all times and examine my part in difficulties that arise in my life (for that is the only part I can do anything about)?
- 5) When I am flooded with uncomfortable feelings, do I patiently accept them, *waiting* with God for resolution as long as it takes, *watching* for the faithful love that never fails to carry me back to a place of peace?

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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