

The Inlook-Outlook Letter

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

We at St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting 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 month's issue examines what happens when we “take things personally”.

Taking Things Personally

Once when I was personally affronted by something someone had done, another person challenged me with this question: “Is there *ever* any reason to take anything personally?” I was taken aback because his question made me realize that I usually do take things personally. After some reflection, I decided it is probably true; we should not *ever* take anything personally. Is this possible? If I ignore an insult, will I be seen as weak and be treated badly by others, perhaps put myself in danger? This could be a common situation in prison as was once described by one of the worship group members. What do Quakers and the Christian faith have to say about this?

Not taking things personally is about the self-worth one feels. If some calls me a 'jerk', do I really believe I am a 'jerk'? If I take the insult personally, it means I really do believe (or fear) deep down inside that I am a 'jerk'. In this situation I am more liable to react defensively, as our 'ego', the part of our psyche that holds together our sense of self through deeply held beliefs, acts automatically. If, on the other hand, I have a deeply felt respect for myself, then what happens to me 'out there', such as an insult or unpleasant circumstance or disappointment, doesn't disturb my sense of myself or embarrass me because it is simply not true. When God created man and woman in the image of himself, they were the last living things to be created and he saw that *it was very good* (Genesis 1: 31). We are created in the image of God, and we are “very good”. God created us as perfect, perfectly human, which means we are all fallible. When we fear our imperfections, we hide, defend and justify. Defensiveness makes us far more vulnerable than admitting our fallibility, i.e., our perfect humanity. This is something to hold on to in moments of difficulty and perplexity that will come as surely as we live. In such moments we may feel just the opposite, imperfect and vulnerable.

What can we do when we suddenly feel confronted with a bad situation or an insult? We can think of a bad situation as a crisis, and ourselves as part of an “Emergency Management Team”. On the team with us are friends we can trust, our spiritual discipline including our religious community and its tools such as scripture and other writings, and God in all of God's manifest forms, as a friend (Jesus), as a wise parent (Father/Mother), and as an unseen part of us and everyone (Holy Spirit).

When we find ourselves in an unpleasant and potentially dangerous situation, we usually don't have time to think, so it is good to think about what we can do not only in the moment something happens, but also before and after the event. The 'before' things we call preventive measures. The 'during' things we call 'emergency actions', and the 'after' things we call 'cleanup and repair'.

Before. In Public Health we say “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”. The cardinal principle to remember is to let go of *judging others*. Here is an amazing fact, every religious tradition in the world speaks the same wisdom about judgment: Get out of the business of judging and leave it to God. All traditions say that human beings tend to *believe* they are good judges of character, yet actually, in practice, are very poor at it. Be aware of who and what you consistently judge because the

judgments reveal our own fears and “hot spots,” where we will be the most reactive. Therefore, when we work on our judgments, make peace with them, we find we are less reactive. Our judgments of other people reveal *our* work. The reason we have a hard time judging others correctly is that we can only see the character flaws in others that we ourselves possess! This is because we can know nothing except through personal experience. Jesus knew this when he said, *Do not judge or you too will be judged* (Matthew 7: 1). When we judge others we are really only saying things about ourselves.

In contrast to judging others, we can be good at judging ourselves if we do it in a disciplined and positive way that will genuinely help us know ourselves better, both our strengths and our limitations. Knowing our limitations we can work on them and become stronger. We do this by taking an inventory and sharing it with another trusted individual as it says in the forth and fifth steps of the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step program for example.

During. You can react or you can think. If you react you cannot think, but if you can make space for thinking, there may be a solution that would not have been available to you while reacting. One way to get to a thinking place, is getting quiet. Not an angry kind of sullen quiet that we might see as a prelude to an explosive outburst, but a true quiet within, being still and asking for light on how to proceed. Jesus got quiet and bent down and began writing in the dirt, when an angry crowd brought an adulterous woman to him they wanted to condemn (John 8: 3-11). His quiet action interrupted the escalation of anger. After a moment he was able to respond in a way that made them think about who they were. They were ashamed by his revelation and left the woman alone. By “getting quiet” I don't mean going into the silence or assuming a meditative pose or something like this. It might be misunderstood. Something much simpler, maybe taking a deep breath, pausing ever so slightly, inviting with your whole being a solution. God is always there instantly, so it doesn't take much.

Remember a calm, collected answer to an insult is better than something emotionally charged. *You can kill more flies with a spoonful of honey than you can with 10 barrels of vinegar* said St. Francis de Sales, the 17th century Bishop. *A gentle answer turns away wrath* says Proverbs (15:1).

After. Assessing our part in a conflict, we usually always discover some responsibility for a negative outcome. Immediate apology is best without expectation that the other person follow suit. Once, I became so angry at something said on a Quaker website, I responded immediately to an 'answer' box provided. Later, I thought about it and when my wife came home I asked her to look at my response, which had long been sent. Her reaction? “You had better send an apology and explain your position a bit more.” It was a bitter pill, but I did it, apologizing first to the person who had written the original article that had stirred me up. Making amends, it is called in the 12-step program. We make a list first of those we have harmed and then become willing to respond to them. We then in step 9 make direct amends to such people, *except when to do so would injure them or others*. This last bit is important, because it is not always appropriate to make direct amends if further injury (emotional or otherwise) could occur. We have to use our judgment here. This is a good exercise of our judgment!

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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