

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

Fathers

A father is a thousand schoolmasters-Louis Nizer

As a child I remember my father only once, yet he taught me many lessons: 'When problems come, run! Don't trust anyone. With charm and hard work you can turn a bad situation into a job well-done. Don't ever admit you are depressed, down on your luck or afraid. Medicate yourself. Problems are caused by other people and circumstances. You have to manipulate people to get what you want', to name a few.

How did I learn these lessons so well when he wasn't even there? It seems impossible, but true. What does the Judeo-Christian heritage teach us about fathers and about being a father? Jesus often refers to God as *Abba*, meaning something like 'dad', an endearing image. No view of God as loving father is more potent than the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15.11-32): Even though his younger son had done the unspeakable in Jewish culture, and squandered the inheritance his father had worked lifelong to obtain for him, the father has no thought of this as he rushes out with a cloak to cover his naked son, who he sees returning home after such a long absence he thought him dead, simply because he *loves* him. Fathers are to be a loving, merciful and forgiving presence in their son's and daughter's lives.

This parable teaches us about good fatherhood but also about the nature of God. The Christian theologian Walter Brueggemann did a study of the most common words that describe God in the Old Testament, and he found them to be: "merciful, gracious, faithful, forgiving and steadfast in love" (Richard Rohr, Things Hidden, 2007, p. 10). In the New Testament this is summarized by John the Evangelist when he declares, *God is love* (1 John 4.8).

However, many people imagine a very different sort of God. Perhaps for them, their idea of God reflects what their actual father was like. If their upbringing included physical punishment and arbitrary use of power and control, they may see God as powerful, angry and fear-inspiring. This image of God is so embedded in our culture, that a 'Far-Side' cartoon makes fun of it: It shows a man happily walking down a street whistling to himself unaware that a grand piano is about to fall on him. Up in the corner of the cartoon is an inset of 'god' who has just hit the 'enter' button on his computer; the screen reveals the scene of the man walking down the street.

What makes this funny? It is funny because we know this is not what God is like, yet at the same time, down at some deep, primitive level, we fear that it is!

None of the adjectives describing God in Walter Brueggemann's study indicates a powerful, angry, punishing, vindictive and/or judgmental entity. These are human characteristics, and their common use suggests that we tend to make God into our own image, even though we are instructed it is the other way round: *We* are made in the image of God (Genesis 1.27). When we make God into something human, we are breaking the first commandment: *You shall have no other Gods to rival me* (Exodus 20.3).

When we were growing up, my mom explained dad's alcoholism, which in the 1940's and 50's was taboo for discussion. He may have been clinically depressed or worse. His leaving our family never to return, was particularly devastating to my sister, who suffered a psychotic episode and became mentally disabled.

Perhaps this is why for so many years I was skeptical of the value of religion. I looked to my work and science instead. Then something happened that was completely out of my control. My first wife left me. I had to start to live my life an entirely different way if I was to survive. Some of the lessons my father taught me would have to be discarded. I turned to two spiritual programs for help: The 12 Steps for Children of Alcoholics and to Quaker meeting. In both places I found 'fathers', men who could mentor me, in whom I could trust.

Later in life I learned my father had another family, whom he had also abandoned. I got to know my half-sister, nearly 20 years older than me. What a blessing! I learned from her what her visits to dad in his later years were like. This man who had won honors in college, was once an Episcopal minister and brilliant at sports, lived utterly defeated. Through the 12-step program and an active spiritual life, I was able to forgive and accept my father for who he was. Then, and only then, I realized my father gave me a very great gift. He showed me his brokenness; he lived it out in front of me; I believe I am a more compassionate person for his witness; I shudder to think the empty life of pretense I would have lived without his example. In his way he brought me many blessings. Some queries for us to consider:

1. What lessons did my father teach me? Which do I wish to retain/discard?
2. What is my image of God like? What does God do for me in my life today? How can I become closer to God?
3. Who are my fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters in my life today? How can I grow to be a parent who is merciful, gracious, faithful, forgiving and steadfast in love?

June 19th is Father's Day-May you and your family be blessed!

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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