

The Inlook-Outlook Letter

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

St. Lawrence Valley Friends 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*. One of our prison members writes about "Why I am a Quaker".

Why I am a Quaker by Dre Smalls-Cape Vincent C. F.

This question has been asked of me numerous times and every time I seem to get stuck in answering it. I'm ready to answer it now. I became a Quaker, because what I saw in other Quakers, I wanted people to see in me. I became a Quaker because of the actions of Quakers towards me when I wasn't one. In spirit I strive to be like Lucius T., Jesse H., Eddie P. and Nick C. and others I've come across within the last 23 years incarcerated. In actions along with Spirit, I strive to be like and look up to Bill, Pat, Dick, Russell and everyone else from not just the St. Lawrence Valley Friends but also New Paltz and Poplar Ridge meetings. In part it is your actions towards me that have helped me become the person I am today.

Since 1994 when I went to my first worship meeting in Auburn C.F., Quakers have shown me nothing but love. I have been taught that it is all right to share. There is nothing wrong with crying, and along with reaffirming that, smiling and laughter is good for you! Being humble is a great feeling!!! So, the next time somebody asks me *why are you a Quaker?* My response will be: *Sit down and let me tell you a story about who I was before and who I am now!*

Growing in Community

Dre's meditation on 'Why I am a Quaker' reminds us of the importance of community in the religious, spiritual and emotional growth of a person. In it he mentions several names of people who have been especially helpful to him and even communities of people too numerous to name. We are reminded of how much we are all touched by each other as we share our understanding of our own path. As St. Paul said to the early Christian gatherings, we share our spiritual gifts whatever those may be, and in doing so *we build each other up*. We must never forget that we are important to each other and each of us carries unknown strengths that we may only discover when we have the courage to share them and someone says, *Hey, thank you for that!* Or, in good Quakerese, *that spoke to my condition!* (See "Quakerese" below).

Another thing Dre mentions that is important is change. *Let me tell you a story about who I was before and who I am now!* This is the story common to all of us, incarcerated or no. I know a man who was in a prison of his own making and didn't know it for a long time. Finally, when he was about 47 years old, the walls started to crack from a crisis that was going on in his life that was out of control. The illusion of control he had carefully constructed suddenly came crashing down over a divorce.

He reached out to a Quaker meeting (He had lapsed from Friends for about a decade) and the 12-step program. Through both he learned the importance of community and his need to grow up. He did not

have to know all the answers himself; it was OK to say *I hurt! I need help!* He speaks frequently about being embraced by the group, strong arms around his shoulders of the man sitting next to him also helped, as he cried his grief at that first 12-step meeting! Yes, hugs are good for you, and he learned to laugh in those meetings at his shenanigans! To laugh at oneself, now there is a talent! (And Quakers can be funny too). Someone said: *He who can laugh at himself will never fail to be amused!*

To let people you trust know what is really going on inside, that is a great freedom. Only then can we get their perspective. Sometimes just getting something out in the open, without anyone else saying anything in response, just listening, can bring us suddenly to knowing the answer, and how to move towards it. May God help us know ourselves better and his purpose for us, and give us the strength to get there!

Do you know “Quakerese”?

Here are some definitions for terms Quakers often use from the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting website:

- **Quakers/Friends** — “Quakers” was one of the first names given to the group because Friends would tremble and quake in meeting for worship when visited by the Holy Spirit, just before they gave a spoken ministry. Once, George Fox, the 17th century Quaker minister and leader, told a judge who was trying him for blasphemy, “Even you sir, will tremble and quake when you come before God!” The judge reportedly then asked him: “Are you a Quaker, sir?” Friends accepted the name as a useful tag and have continued to use it, but when times settled, they adopted the formal name “Religious Society of Friends.” **Friends** refers to the Gospel of John 15: 15; when Jesus has taught all he knows from the Father to his disciples, he leaves off calling them “servants” and says he will now call them “friends”.
- **“Meeting”** — Quakers often call their local congregations “meetings” and the buildings where they meet “meetinghouses.”
- **“Meeting for Worship”** — what others may call their religious service. (A visitor came in, sat down, and soon noticed that others in the room were sitting quietly. Asking “When does the service begin?” got the reply, “When worship is over.”). [Service in the cause of human suffering is one of the Quaker **testimonies**-See “Testimonies” below]
- A **“Monthly” Meeting** meets to conduct business once a month — committee reports, decisions, updates, and planning. Meetings for worship may be held every week, twice a week, or whenever is decided by the group.
- A **“Yearly” Meeting** is composed of the Monthly Meetings in a geographical area. It coordinates activities of Quakers in that region and gives them, generally once a year, a time to gather and share their work, often called ‘sessions’ of the Yearly Meeting.
- **Quaker Testimonies**-The testimonies are ways in which Quakers put their faith into practice. There is no set number, but the following would be typical: Truth and Integrity, Peace, Simplicity, Care of the gifts of the creation, and Equality and Community (Service in God's *saving justice*)

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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