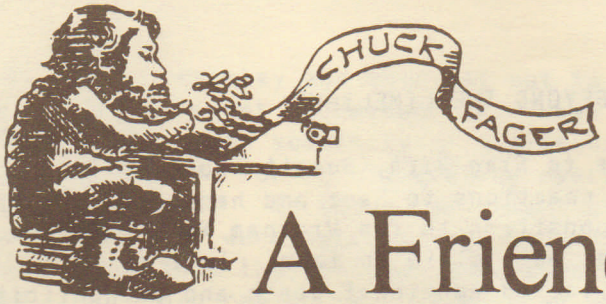

A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Seventy-Seven ISSN #0739-5418 Eighth Month, 1987

Dear Friend,

It happened again--We got scooped. And not once, but **twice.** The topic is marriage: what does it mean among Friends today? What should it mean? Can we be content with the received religious, social and legal definitions of this relationship? What witness ought we to bear in this regard today?

These and related questions were on my menu for a possible upcoming issue; but both *Friends Journal* and the ***Newsletter*** of Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns beat me to it. FLGC's long article in its summer issue dealt mainly with same-gender marriage, an item which has recently exercized several yearly and numerous monthly meetings; but ***Friends Journal***'s piece, by Janet Hemphill Minshall in its 7/1-15 issue, dealt with a heterosexual and monogamous, but non-legal union. This is not only a matter of sexual morality: there are other aspects too, such as the tax and public benefit implications for marriages, especially between elderly or disabled people, which have come to some Friends' attention.

Weighty matters, these, on which much seeking and threshing is needed; so they may turn up here yet. One other wrinkle that deserves mention here, however, is that the FLGC article in my view marked a transition for its ***Newsletter.*** It is rapidly outgrowing its role as an obscure special interest organ, and could become a new Quaker publication with a particular identity but of broad interest and Society-wide implications. It is a journal to take note of. (To get a copy, write to FLGC, Box 222, Sumneytown PA 18084.) And while I am at it, Friends interested in marriage matters should also take a look at ***Friends Bulletin***, the monthly publication of Pacific Yearly Meeting(2160 Lake St., San Francisco CA 94121.) It has published numerous reports, particularly on same-sex unions, which have been before several meetings in its area.

Two other items to note are the passing this summer of two Quaker giants: E. Raymond Wilson, the pillar of Quaker lobbying in Washington for peace and justice for over forty years; and Bayard Rustin, one of the central figures in the civil rights and other social struggles of this century. Will we see their like again?

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

PS. I need your help. Inserted in this issue you will find a page-size advertising flyer for ***A Friendly Letter.*** Will you take it and post it on a Quaker bulletin board? Getting this flyer posted in meetinghouses and churches bulletin boards will give the letter some needed wider exposure. If there isn't a Friendly bulletin board nearby, will you pass it along to a Friend? Many thanks.

JOAN BAEZ: SEEKING LIGHT BEYOND THE LIMELIGHT

I opened Joan Baez's new book, ***And A Voice to Sing With,*** (Summit Books, $19.95) with reluctance. I have long had sharply conflicting reactions to Baez and her work. On the one hand, I shared her advocacy of nonviolence and opposition to the Vietnam War. On the other hand, with some exceptions most of her music, her main claim to fame, left me cold. Sure, the voice was pretty. But to my ears the singing lacked emotional depth and authenticity.

For that matter, despite agreement on political goals and methods, almost every time I heard of her speaking or writing, say, against the war, I found myself cringing at her tone and posture. After all, she was barely twenty-five, had flunked out of college after one term, and said her only "real" job outside folk stardom was a short stint teaching people to ride motor scooters. Yet there she was, pontificating stridently about how to end war and reshape world society as if she really knew what she was talking about. Part of my reaction was due, no doubt, to sheer fear of recognition: I was the same age, and said many similar things to vastly smaller audiences, and God help me, did I also sound that callow and naive?

Pass The Kleenex, Please

But it wasn't just the style of her political pronouncements that grated. When I read on a mid-sixties album jacket her version of ppetic profundity, advising us that "My life is a crystal teardrop"; I wished somebody would hand her a hankie. She closed these same notes with gushing rhetoric: "Would it embarrass you very much if I were to tell you...that I love you?" My response to this was, **You bet,** it embarrasses me very much to hear one of my emblematic peers emitting such patent rubbish in public. She was an easy target for the cruel lampooning given "Joanie Phoanie", in cartoonist Al Capp's comic strip "Li'l Abner."

Baez recycled this same mawkish passage to close her first book, the slim autobiography ***Daybreak,*** published in 1966. That same year, my first book was finished; it was about Black Power, and despite considerable firsthand experience of the topic, I minimized autobiographical references in the manuscript. This was by intention: Baez's writings were among several examples persuading me that autobiographies by twenty five-year olds were but another indication of the insidiously destructive self-preoccupation of our generation. We were too young, too green. I was, certainly; and so was our lady of the folk scene.

Giving a Voice to Parallels

Given this many complaints, why didn't I just ignore Baez? I tried, but I couldn't, because except for the fame and fortune part, our paths kept running parallel and crossing, though never at the same time. This was almost inevitable, I suppose, given our continuing commitment to nonviolence; we both even spent the night with Dr. Martin Luther King. (My night with him was in a Selma, Alabama jail cell; theirs was passed elsewhere.) But it also included more personal things, like being parties to early joint custody arrangements for the issue of youthful, doomed marriages; and later, sharing a sense of being out of synch with post-Vietnam American culture. I can relate this sense directly to Baez, because the last album of hers I heard, ***Diamonds and Rust*** in 1975, sounded surprisingly good to me; but it was also the one that marked the rapid decline of her domestic popularity.

Many of the crossings were because we are Quakers; indeed, she had attended both Cambridge Meeting in Massachusetts, which I joined in 1967, and Palo Alto Meeting in California, where I sojourned a decade ago. It was this connection, pointed out by mutual F/friends who had read it, that led me to give ***And A Voice to Sing With*** a try. How real a Quaker is she, I wondered. I am grateful for their proddings. Where ***Daybreak*** was less an autobiography than a preamble to one; ***Voice,*** as I will call it for short, is a memoir of substance by a woman with solid life experience, who has paid dues and has real stories to tell. Moreover, the stories are told well, and for the most part honestly. She does not skip the low points, even if she occasionally blinks at some of their implications.

Of the low points, two stories plumb her particular depths. Once Baez and her sometime pacifist guru Ira Sandperl visited the famous Catholic Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Baez wanted to know if Merton was an authentic "holy man." So she watched Sandperl get drunk with

him on Irish whiskey and then set out to see if his commitment to monastic vows could be shaken. They almost succeeded too, when the talk turned to a woman from a nearby city to whom Marton had taken something of a platonic monkish fancy: Sandperl offered to get him out of the monastery for a clandestine meeting with her, and the well-lubricated Merton impulsively agreed. In the colder light of a hungover dawn, though, the plotters realized the tackiness they were hatching and backed off. Baez does not quite say so, but one gathers she understood that they had not succeeded in showing Merton to be unholy, just still human. Instead, they had really only underlined why, after all, there are walls around monasteries, namely, to keep the likes of them out.

David Vs. Goliath Again--Did Goliath Win?

More shameful still was Baez's treatment of her husband David Harris. In 1970, while he was in prison for draft resistance, she conducted a steamy and ill-concealed affair with a person named here as Bernie. She took it to the point of including songs written to this lover on the record entitled ***David's Album.*** Even by confused Sixties sexual standards, this was profoundly shabby behavior, and it is hardly surprising that the marriage dissolved shortly after Harris was released. She speaks to Harris directly about this in a long aside, but without apology or evident regret. Yet is that a telltale undertone of guilt which surfaces later, for instance in the description of a rare visit by both parents to their son Gabriel's school, when they watched him play football in the rain? She seems more than just understanding recalling how carefully Harris kept his distance, even declining to share her umbrella. It is a sad picture, and an all-too familiar one in our generation.

But let's not dwell on the low points, for there are highs they must not obscure. Among these, Baez's chapter on Hanoi is riveting. While visiting there in Twelfth Month, 1972 she was caught in the infamous carpet bombing raids by which Richard Nixon sought to force its version of peace on North Vietnam. Lucky to escape alive, after an initial night of terror she showed a veteran soldier's grit and courage as the raids continued. The ordeal even produced a kind of nobility--and the one good joke in the book(See "Quaker Chuckles"). Toward the end, when another visitor pointed to fresh bomb craters and asked if "You still think like a pacifist?" her response was sharp, and now carried a ring of experience: "'This is supposed to change my mind?'" I said in a quiet fury. 'You are a fool.'"

In 1976 she withstood against another kind of bombardment. That came when she published letters urging the victorious Hanoi government to respect the human rights of the boat people and release its many political prisoners, and worked to expose the Cambodian holocaust. This time, though, the attacks came not from the right but from leftist "peace" activists and former allies, who were carefully averting their eyes from what was happening. Lamentably, key staff of the American Friends Service Committee were among her active antagonists. To Baez's credit, she not only kept up her efforts, but she learned from them as well.

Who Is Thee Calling Odd, Friend?

All this makes ***Voice*** exciting reading; but is not what it is ultimately about. ***Voice*** is a midlife crisis document, part of the basic self-examination and sorting out that came upon Baez relentlessly as it has to many of us. Now unmistakably an **ex**-superstar, she is reconstructing her career, and her life, on that sobering realization. Part of that process, she says, has involved a return to her religious roots. She hated Quaker meeting as a child, and quit attending when she was eighteen. But now she says she has come back, drawn by inner necessity. In ***Daybreak*** she called Quakers an "odd bunch of stuffed shirts." True as this description often is, ***Voice*** makes amply clear, to me at least, that she has been just as characteristically odd and stuffy in her way as any of the rest of us. And so like the rest of us, she needs not only silent worship but also the worship community, imperfect as the Society which carries them may be. Accepting this part of her reality was both humbling and, as she is discovering, regenerating.

Closing this book, I said: Welcome home, Friend Joan; thee's been missed. We'd offer to kill the traditional fatted calf in thy honor, but, well, some of us are rather noisy vegetarians, and others might be uncomfortable making such an extravagant fuss, and still others are dubious about anything that ritualistic...and it would us take months to reach unity. Would thee be willing to settle for, say, a potluck lunch instead?

Address Correction Requested

INSIDE: JOAN BAEZ--
IS QUAKERISM'S PRODIGAL DAUGHTER
RETURNING TO THE FOLD?

From: Chuck Fager, *A Friendly Letter*
P.O. Box 1361
Baileys Crossroads, VA 22041

THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

Do you remember Whittier's poem, "In The Old South"? It begins this way:

"She came and stood in the Old South Church,
A Wonder and a sign,
With a look the old-time sibyls wore,
Half-crazed and half-divine.

She was Margaret Brewster, the year was 1677, the city was Boston and the occasion was a protest against a law prescribing a new loyalty oath. Brewster was a Friend from Barbados, and she was brought to trial in Eighth Month for having protested the law by disrupting public worship barefoot and dressed in sackcloth and ashes. At her trial she eloquently confronted Governor Leverett, who told her to shut up. The judge said she was led by the spirit of the devil, and she was sentenced, as usual, to be publicly flogged while tied to the back of an ox-cart. As Whittier puts it:

"They whipped her away at the tail o' the cart
through half the streets of the town,
But the words she uttered that day nor fire
Could burn nor water drown."

And this was, the historians say, the last time Friends were officially persecuted in Boston.

QUAKER CHUCKLE

While caught in the carpet bombing of Hanoi in Twelfth Month, 1972, Joan Baez was invited to a Christmas eve party at the apartment of some French reporters. Calling Christmas her "favorite holiday," Baez could not resist the urge to sing, and was entertaining the group with a series of carols when a bombing raid began. Her hosts were used to the blasts, and usually ignored them. But this time the explosions abruptly came nearer and nearer, and suddenly it was time to drop everything and race to the nearest crude underground shelter.

Running with the others toward the shelter stairs, Baez turned to a companion and shouted, "Those bastards! If there's anything I ***hate*** it's being interrupted in the middle of a performance!"
