

THE WORK OF THIS MOMENT

Thoughts About Its New York Office on the Occasion of
the American Friends Service Committee's 75th Anniversary

By Daniel A. Seeger

Good evening, (F)riends. It is a joy to see you all. Although I love my work at Pendle Hill, and enjoy living there, I also miss the people associated with the New York American Friends Service Committee very much. Thank you for inviting me to share this 75th anniversary celebration with you!

I was on the telephone with Elizabeth Enloe the other day to find out what she expected from me this evening. Elizabeth said, "We want you to give a comprehensive account of developments in the New York AFSC office during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s." I drew in my breath and was about to gasp when Elizabeth went on to say, "Why don't you take about twelve minutes to do that." Well, I thought to myself, if this is the way assignments are being meted out under the new regime, there is certainly no danger that the regional office will go slack!

As I was ruminating about what I might share with you during my twelve minutes, it occurred to me that I might talk about the time that the Jewish Defense League took over and occupied our AFSC office, a story which would have shown the heroism of Jack Patterson, Claudia Crawford, and all their associates on the Peace Committee, which would in turn symbolize the quality of caring competence throughout the Regional Office; but then I also quickly thought that I might tell the story of how Wray Bailey went out to Elizabeth, New Jersey and started a housing program--started it absolutely from scratch, and carried forward a body of work which has built up to be the New Jersey Committee Relations Program as it exists today. I remember those very early days when Wray started out with nothing, and when people like Alfred Sidwell and Barbara Heizman, who were members of our Housing Program Committee, did everything from deliberating about strategy to fixing up the office. I remember going there one day to find Alfred planing the top of a door, while Barbara was hanging curtains she had just made for the storefront windows.

But then I thought it might be interesting to talk about the first time we conducted a mediation in Flushing, New York entirely in the Chinese language, an example of the patience and creativity of Lauren Wedeles and her staff and committee colleagues. That, I thought, might be more up-to-date, and give a good example of how we are meeting today's needs at the community level

But then I became concerned that on the occasion of this anniversary we

should not glamorize or sentimentalize the past, projecting it as a series of unimpeded triumphs, which might inaccurately give the impression that any disorders of the present are a aberration which is untrue to the thrust of our experience. So then it occurred to me that I might talk about the time when the Regional Office Peace Committee wanted to fire one of Jack's predecessors, and when the Executive Committee responded by firing the Peace Committee. So all was not a bed of roses, but that story, too, would take more than twelve minutes to relate.

The first thing, however, of which I am mindful in contemplating the situation during the sixties, seventies and eighties in the New York Regional Office of the American Friends Service Committee is that we had been given a wonderful head start by Bob Vogel and Honey Knopp. Bob gave its initial form to the Regional Office, drawing on his extensive experience as a peace secretary and as fund-raiser in the Pasadena office of the AFSC; Honey brought her many Quakerly gifts to her task as Interim Secretary between Bob and me.

I am also aware that when I arrived in the regional office as a college secretary, there were already wonderfully strong programs going on, such as the Southern Student Program, which had been pioneered by George and Margery Rubin, and by Alvin and Margo Petrus, and which was so ably staffed by Gene Angstadt.

In any event, it occurs to me that the most useful thing that I might do in this twelve and a half minutes is to reflect on the common spiritual themes which characterized the last thirty years of the New York Office in the light of the current moment and the future. The truth is that I feel myself to be much more enormously intrigued by the present moment and by the future than by the past. I suppose a reason for this is that, as we all know, the AFSC is challenged to carry forward its work in a world so changed that it would have been unimaginable during most of the period of time that I was serving as your staff member and Executive Secretary.

The enormity of this change is thrust upon us again and again in numerous ways. For example, it was slightly less than a year ago that we saw millions of people deliriously celebrating the victory of the United States and its allies over a country the size of Montana, while at the same time a community of homeless people were preparing to be evicted from their space beneath the West Side Highway! It seems to me the hollowness of that celebration one year ago is symbolic of the hollowness of the spirit of pride that has overtaken many sectors of our country's life as the communist world has dissolved.

For the celebrators seem not to appreciate that our triumphant market economy is producing increasing disparities in income among American families; that the same market economy that seems to work marvels for share-holders is leaving workers increasingly bereft; that huge and mobile economic actors roam the globe at will while territorially-bound political communities seem unable to check them,

and so they are unregulated by anything but their own will to power and wealth; that everywhere concentrated wealth is thrown cheek by jowl with extreme poverty, causing countless threats to peace, to freedom, and to human rights; and finally, that our market economy, presuming as it does that there will be an endless expansion of productive forces, seems to place itself at war with the very ecological basis of human survival.

At the same time, the various revolutionary projects around the world which presumed to offer alternatives to the capitalist political economy appear to be everywhere in ruins. This failure of revolutionary movements is not merely a practical failure. It is a moral failure as well, for there is scarcely any example in our time of a determined attempt to produce swift and sweeping change that has not resulted in tyranny, often in tyranny immeasurably worse than that perpetrated by the old social order.

And so the insistent question arises: how do we move forward in the face of these paradoxes, in the face of the practical and moral failures of both the victors and the losers in the present historical drama, and does the AFSC have any particular genius for addressing these dilemmas?

I know it may seem odd to say this, but one of the insights of early Friends which is relevant here is their insistence on the limitations of words. Friends know that the very Truth which illumines our lives comes to us wrapped in enigmas and mysteries, not in a set of sharply etched propositions which can be summarized in creedal statements. Socrates claimed that his only wisdom was the knowledge of his own ignorance. And one can read in the Gospel of John how Jesus, when speaking to the Pharisees, observed that those who claim Truth as a possession are apt to become as blind people.

No one talks very much about religious creeds in the modern world. But it seems to be that a contemporary analogy to the creeds against which Friends rebelled exists in ideologies, and in the bumper sticker version of ideologies--politically correct ideas of the center, the right, or the left. Like the creeds against which Friends rebelled, ideologies presume to offer total explanation of life. They are comprehensive ways of life and thought. Indeed, Marx's claimed for the proletariat qualities much like the Old Testament claims for God--omniscience, righteousness, and historical sovereignty, all devoted to the avenging of past wrongs and to the transfiguring of human existence. Indeed, even today, it is not uncommon to hear similar extravagant claims made, not necessarily about the proletariat, but about whatever oppressed group of people may have caught the attention at the moment.

But modern ideologies have assumed even more than the traditional religious creeds against which Friends rebelled. Modern ideologies presume to offer a formula

for lasting communal harmony by eliminating once and for all the root causes of all social injustice. Moreover, this breath-taking project is presumed to be accomplishable without the help of God. Modern ideologies assert that perfect justice can be created by human beings themselves through political revolution, or social science, or psychotherapy. In short, they assume that human beings can be exalted through their own self-creating acts. Yet, ironically, modern revolutionaries, while willing freedom and equality for everyone, have seemed to create only desperation, and even terror. Intending human self-exaltation, they have sown human self-abasement.

What Friends have in common with all other people of faith--with the various strains of Native American spirituality, with the great religions of Asia and Africa--is an awareness of mystery and a capacity for awe. This radical amazement in the face of the mystery of existence causes us to be in constant state of mal-adjustment to creeds, ideologies, and politically correct ideas, which would pin everything down with words and concepts. We are, in a sense, stunned by what cannot be put into words. We seek to live in a way which responds to the mystery behind the words, the mystery which the words are meant to reveal but which they often actually conceal. We see it as our supreme obligation to pause, to wait, to hear, and to respond to the continuing revelation of a divine voice, and so we are wary of set commitments and plans, wary of humanly-generated schemes and projects. We are aware of the tragic dimensions of history, of the fallibility of even the noblest intentioned historical agents, and of the demonic effects of the worst actors on the stage of history. We hope that our practice of silent waiting will rebuke the self-righteousness that threatens continually to subvert the compassion and good judgment of political activists such as ourselves. Thus we adopt a prophetic stance which is disposed to attack concrete and visible injustices; we have an intense desire to see particular, immediately visible wrongs righted; we are, frankly, summoned to piecemeal action rather than to becoming enslaved in an overarching ideology or creedal vision. We do the work of *this* moment.

It seems to me that this marriage of a wariness about grand simplifications with a desire to do something prophetic regarding concrete and visible injustices is what has characterized the New York AFSC Office over the last thirty years, and which, whatever particular turns the history or the future might take, could be commended as a useful approach for the future. Certainly, I think it is fair to say that this perspective is what has given form and shape, not only to our own work in the Region, but to much of the dialogue, much of the searching conversation, we have been engaged in with our colleagues elsewhere in the AFSC, and with various friendly associates and loyal oppositionists in related peace and social change movements.

But it would be a mistake not to acknowledge at this time of celebrating 75 years of American Friends Service Committee service that the Regional Office in which we have worked has been constantly up-built and strengthened by its

association with the national and world-wide AFSC.

One of the benefits I feel I received from the national office as a Regional Office Executive Secretary was its organization for us of the Regional Consultative Group meetings. That is where I first got to know Elizabeth Enloe, and where, during the six or seven years where she was a member of the same group of colleagues that I was. As all of us labored together with the great issues of modern times and with the particular issues which colored the AFSC's life, I came to love the spirit which Elizabeth brought to our deliberations and to admire and respect her work for the AFSC office in Atlanta. I was extremely happy and proud when it seemed that the way might open for her to succeed me as your Regional Secretary, although I dutifully kept a great distance from the screening and selection process, and conscientiously avoided pulling any strings! But I am really happy that she is here working with you, happy both for her and for you.

One of the other things the national office provides for us is the National Board of Directors, which provides overall guidance and focus for the many parts of the AFSC. Kate Nicklin and her predecessors who were named here earlier this evening, take upon themselves participation in this Board of Directors as an aspect of their job of being our clerks. It has been wonderful to work with Kate as my time at the AFSC drew to a close, and it seemed like a special gift that she has embodied in such a fine way all the virtues which have characterized her predecessors. But I must admit that, as I think of our many sandwich lunches in a coffee shop in Westbury, discussing the upcoming agenda of the Executive Committee or some issue which was burning in the life of the Regional Office, I recall that these conferences were always an addition to the weight Kate bore each day in her capacity as a school social worker for the Westbury Board of Education. Kate often had the task of chasing down lost children or lost parents; yet she was able at the same time to think globally about the regional, national and world-wide work of the American Friends Service Committee, giving to it a quality of Friendly intelligence which was extraordinary and precious. Thinking of all this my mind goes blank every time she enters my thoughts and I have to remind myself that she is now a retired person--at least retired from school social work, if not from AFSC! I am so grateful for the care and wisdom Kate was able to give to us all, but I find myself completely unable to visualize her as retired!

I hope, indeed I know, that you will afford to Kate and to Elizabeth the wonderful support and wise counsel you afforded to me when I was working here, and I hope as well that you will continue to cherish in these times the stubbornly non-ideological nature of the AFSC and its New York office, our willingness to be constantly skeptical of the fashionable buzz word or the politically correct concept. Rather than being a quaint habit, this stubbornness of this is a great source of Truth and strength.

A group of non-ideological, non-creedal people prudently waiting for leadings as to what, in existing circumstances, must unfailingly be done, will engage in searching dialogue. Each person will speak the truth as she or he understands it; each will listen as others speak from their understanding. Often and over during these last three decades in the New York Regional Office, I have been frustrated because I have failed to be persuasive about one or another issue, but I have rarely felt not listened to. When love performs these two offices--speaking and listening, service rooted in Truth is made possible, and community happens. This is what, it seems to me, the American Friends Service Committee is all about--true service and true community. I am grateful for having been part of it with you.

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