

The Best of Friends, vol. 1

ANTHOLOGY OF NEW QUAKER WRITING
PUBLISHED 1999 BY KIMO PRESS IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE
FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

An Excerpt from

Jan de Hartog: A Captain on the Ocean of Light and Love

Ann Walton Sieber

Part One

In 1963, the Live Oak Friends Meeting, Houston's tiny unprogrammed meeting, started having its Sunday meetings for worship in the city's charity hospital. I wasn't there then, but I've heard the story.

The meeting's move was to support a concern by Jan and Marjorie de Hartog. The couple had been led to volunteer as orderlies in the charity Jeff Davis Hospital (and later, in its successor, Ben Taub), which primarily served the city's poor black population. Appalled by the conditions they found there, they organized a cadre of volunteers – both Quaker and non – to come help.

Next, Jan wrote a series of vivid editorials on the ghastly state of the hospital, then a book called *The Hospital*, which focused national and international attention on Houston.

Next, the de Hartogs were run out of town.

The de Hartogs aired the Space City's dirty laundry at a time when Houston was reveling in the national spotlight with its new bucking-bronco-and-rocketship image. The *Texas Observer* called the exposé "the biggest controversy to fill the front pages of both Houston newspapers for many years"; the *Wall Street Journal* dubbed *The Hospital* "journalistic muckraking in the best sense of the word"; and *The Los Angeles Times* described it as a "formidable power for betterment" and "the book that changed a city." An otherwise unrelated, upbeat NASA story in *Newsweek* closes with a sudden dark mention of Ben Taub.

Houston's boom-town image, our Astrodome, our astronauts, our oil glamour, all suddenly became lit with an ironic and unflattering light. We became the city that air-conditioned its zoo, but not its hospital for poor blacks.

The Hospital is a Quaker book, and Jan is a Quaker writer. (Calvin Trillin, in an otherwise enthusiastic review of *The Hospital*, pokes fun at de Hartog's Quaker persuasions: "de Hartog's admitted predilection to find the best in everybody occasionally makes it difficult for the reader to understand how a group of such superior beings, even if they are facing tremendous odds, could be overcome by such chaos.")

But although Jan's books are regarded affectionately and devotedly by many among the wider Quaker fellowship, Jan does not seem to hold a place among the pantheon of revered Quaker writers and thinkers. He told me that when his novel, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, the first of a

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three-volume Quaker historical saga, was published, he was likened by the Quaker establishment to a friendly dog that comes uninvited to a family picnic – well-intentioned enough, but still capable of knocking all the carefully prepared food onto the floor with a sweep of its tail.

I don't know about all that – it was a long time ago, and being down in Texas, I don't have much of a feel anyway for the Quaker establishment. But I can speak about the Jan de Hartog who, in 1990, returned with Marjorie to Houston to live, who has been a beloved part of Houston's Live Oak Friends Meeting ever since, and who I feel most happy to have gotten to know as a good friend.

The Hospital is not what Jan (pronounced "yon") is best known for. *The Peaceable Kingdom*, won him a nomination for the Nobel Prize, and caused many a seeker to try our peculiar persuasion. His two-person drama *The Fourposter* launched the genre of husband-and-wife plays, serving as a vehicle for such famous acting couples as Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronin, and Rex Harrison and Lilli Palmer; later made into the musical *I Do!, I Do!*, it has become a chestnut on the sentimental small-town repertoire.

In his native Holland, de Hartog has the stature of a Hemingway or Faulkner. He has won a Tony, been made a knight, admitted into the French Academy, and won the Dutch equivalent of the Legion of Honor. In this country, his novel *The Captain* sold more than one million copies.

By contrast, *The Hospital* is out of print, and difficult to obtain.

Even three decades later, *The Hospital* is difficult reading. "The floors were slippery with blood and vomit, littered with soiled linen, dropped instruments, discarded bottles of Novocain, torn gloves ... blood-soiled mattresses had been flipped over and hastily covered with another sheet, as long as there were sheets. After that ... each man lay in the blood of his predecessor.... This was not a hospital, this was a public utility to keep the dead and dying off the streets."

Like many undertakings in which Marjorie is involved, the de Hartogs' involvement with Jeff Davis started with babies.

At a cocktail party, Marjorie heard that the babies at Houston's charity hospital were going hungry because there were not enough nurses to feed them. Marjorie started volunteering in the nursery; when Jan offered his services, he was assigned to the emergency room.

Within his first ten minutes he had encountered a young black woman hemorrhaging from a miscarriage, a pool of blood spreading under her wheelchair. She had not received any assistance because she was too weak to wheel herself to the front desk to register.

In what reads like a scene from Dante's *Inferno*, Jan described the corridors lined with patients in extreme need, here a "twitching body lashed down with leather straps," or "a pair of pitch-black feet covered with sores," or an incoherent old man "bleeding from his rectum." Just reading the account feels like a harsh duty.

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Despite the horror, the couple continued to volunteer at "old J.D.," and soon it became their prime concern as they worked every odd hour they could find. The book recounts the daily neglect and struggle in the face of vast under-staffing.

Part of the de Hartogs' struggle was overcoming the racist restrictions placed on the volunteers; the hospital volunteer administration had made plain to Marjorie that "Southern ladies did not touch nigger babies...."

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