

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

Dee Birch Cameron was awarded

the first **Best of Friends Award** for Nonfiction.

Giving It Away

By Dee Birch Cameron

The ostensible subject was library fines, and it was one of those frustrating times when the proper response comes too late. A half dozen of us school librarians were sitting around a table talking shop.

Somebody brought up fines, but we didn't stay with the topic long, because it had already been dealt with exhaustively a year earlier when the head of library services had announced an end to home rule in the matter of overdue fines. We all had to charge them.

Some of us had rebelled. I'd been asked to take a poll at the time, and the group of about seventy split almost evenly three ways into pro, con, and neutral factions. The neutral group and those who didn't want to charge overdue fines had turned out to be relatively easy-going respondents, while the enthusiastic finers often elaborated their questionnaires with pleas for solidarity and hints that library fines might be a last bastion as civilization goes to pot. The clamping down, teaching them a lesson approach to life was evident even here.

As we talked, a librarian who had just finished graduate school told of her search through the literature on fines, partly to find out what all the shouting was about and partly to fulfill a requirement for a lengthy research paper. "They've been saying it since the 1920's," she said. "Just don't charge them."

"Well," said a respected veteran, "I understand that, but I still think people should be responsible." We switched to the next subject.

It wasn't till I drove home, reviewing the meeting in memory, that I realized I had been robbed. Or more accurately, I had handed something over that I should have held onto. I had allowed a potent idea, "responsibility," to be appropriated from my arsenal to that of the other side. And I hadn't uttered a word of objection.

Anyone who listed the stereotypes that describe me would not have been surprised. As a librarian I'm in one of those service jobs where my role has been to say, "Need

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something? Let me give it to you." Additionally I'm a woman and a Quaker and an introvert. Here I am; have at me.

But I'm also the soul of responsibility. I get things done on time. In fact I do them early. Doing what I say I'll do and doing what I should are all in my day's work not because of my values and certainly not because of perfectionism but for the most pragmatic of reasons. I like to trust, and I like to be trusted. It's convenient.

I like to stumble with an explorer's excitement through my mind's cloudy regions, secure as possible in the sense that most of what I'm counting on will not fail me. The ground underfoot will hold. The mail will come after lunch. My daughter will be home by supper time. My heart will beat, and the circumference of a circle will stay at pi times the diameter.

So I'm ready to do my part. I'm not embarrassed or proud or grudging about being this way. I have a vision of the world turning as smoothly as possible, and that's all I need to be cheerful about being responsible.

But I'm furious about giving the word away without a fight. And it's not just that my argument was poorer for the moment.

I'm worried about how anti-fine thinking is going to evolve apart from the idea of responsibility. Because ideas do grow, and how they develop depends on what nourishment they have to grow on.

I remember reading once that Americans who visit the countries of their ancestors are often surprised at their own sense of foreignness in places they had expected to feel more at home. The writer said that, aside from the melting pot aspect of America life, immigrant groups began from the moment they arrived to evolve German or Irish or Chinese cultures that diverged from the path those same cultures took evolving in the homelands.

I myself have had this reaction not in actual travel but as a person of mostly Pennsylvania Dutch extraction reading modern German literature. It differed from my impression of what was German, and I thought about what must happen to a culture that tosses huge boatloads of its misfits across an ocean never to return. It doesn't have their outlooks to grow on.

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I think there are intellectual equivalents of mass migration or divorce. Religious and political and intellectual schisms are an example. The intellectual property gets split up. The new parts of whatever has been put asunder set up housekeeping on their own but without some of the necessary tools and supplies. As they grow, they may thrive but turn out curiously lopsided from the compromises they have made with what they have and what they lack.

My own denomination, the Religious Society of Friends, offers an example. In the 1800's, when religion was more of a player in the scramble for human attention than it is now, groups of Quakers decided they just couldn't live with each other anymore. Everybody continued trying to do good in the world and to live in a manner that takes away the occasion for war, but some ran off with Jesus and the Bible, while other absconded with universalism and the old Friends practices of unprogrammed meetings for worship and doing without paid clergy or fixed creeds.

Now there are Friends meetings in which you'd better mention Jesus Christ as your savior and other in which you'd probably better not use the name at all. If you take the spoons and I take the forks, our descendants are likely to develop pretty firm convictions regarding soup and meat in a century or two, and nobody will be really well nourished.

Not only do schismatics of all sorts suffer from living with incomplete sets of tools, but some of the pieces of property that are split don't do well on their own, apart from certain other pieces that might turn out to be on the other side when the separation agreement is worked out. Universalism is an example of this situation among Friends.

The sense that belief or affiliation is not capable of separating anyone from the love of God seems to be one of the greatneses of Christianity. Not only is the idea important but the way in which it was arrived at seems particularly significant. It did not come easily, and it has always been under threat from the deep-seated distrust of strangers that is part of being a survivor in the human race.

It grew from the grassroots. Women and tax collectors and eunuchs and slaves and people on the wrong side of every political or religious or ethnic fence kept insisting.

Peter and Paul and even Jesus gave it eloquent voice, but not until their everyday human hearts had been forcibly twisted around it by coincidences dramatic enough to get their attention, visions that would not go away, and people who would not give up.

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Universalism torn away from these roots in struggle and poetry pales to become something close to the vapid, indiscriminate relativism in which any one thing is as good as another. It has no sharp edges. Hearts can wrap themselves around it with little threat of being opened very deeply.

Other may disagree, but I think the existence of denominations and rites within Christianity is evidence of its strength. It is not a simple religion, summed up succinctly and dealing with only a few issues. That's why it has exported so well through space and time.

Schism, on the other hand, the splitting of groups that have acted as one in the past and have a chance and desire to continue that way, is an extravagance beyond most of our means these days, not only economically but intellectually. There is a limit to how small you can cut a piece of pie and still have anything resembling pie on the plate.

Some of us, often the more liberal of us, give up without a fight. We may stay in our old churches, doing social service and balancing the budget and ensuring the church's survival, but not teaching or preaching. We may gravitate to the small denominations that are friendly to "come outers." Or we may, if we are told as I was, that Christianity cannot be, like Judaism, a cultural religion but is necessarily a religion of the individual rightly-converted heart, leave altogether.

"No, I don't mind," we say, on the way out. "Not at all. Of course you may keep the Bible. Yes, Jesus can be your own personal savior. As large as God is, though, you won't mind if I take a little, will you? Some of that sort of watery part around the edges in the area of the Holy Spirit, that's all. The part you don't use as much. Oh, sure, don't worry about all the history and goodwill associated with the name. I'll think of other names. You won't even recognize them. Patent God, if you want. I'll make do."

There's not a church or a political party or an institution or an art or an academic discipline that doesn't lose when the generous and tentative allow themselves to be bullied. The struggle among ideas is one fight in which openhandedness can be a fault.

Look at the Republican party, if you can bear to. It's the party you stayed in if you wanted to have anything much to talk about at the dinner table at my house. Not that Democrats were unwelcome. But they were treated politely and regaled with generalities. If you wanted to get down to the fine points with no holds barred, you

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talked Republican. My father's father, the proverbial laborer son of immigrants, occasionally ran for small offices. The story goes that he did well until the one time he ran on the Democratic ticket. A "Norman Thomas Republican" I once called my father, and he did not object.

My mother was the Republican judge of elections, a job that required the sharp eye for infraction that I, of all people, knew she had. She rose to precinct chairperson but resigned when "we" ran Goldwater. Not that she became a Democrat. In later years when my father mournfully promised to support a Democratic president for whom he had not voted, she snapped, "Well, I should hope so. It's your country." According to her, you stuck with things even when they didn't go your way.

Something kept her a Republican, and I think now that it was a kind of bred in the bone sense that the Democratic party was the party of the big, bad city and of the pro-slavery South. Her rural, Yankee ancestors had been talking Whig at the supper table before the Republican party existed.

When my husband and I moved to El Paso in the late sixties a Republican primary was a lonely thing. Precinct meetings in a university neighborhood brought together a handful of transplanted eastern liberals and moderates in a "old home week" atmosphere. It was easy to become a county or state delegate, but when we did we shook our heads and wondered whether we had come to the right meeting. Something was happening. These folks were very unfamiliar.

Then came the year of the crowded precinct meeting. My husband went, and he came back thunderstruck describing what came to be called "yuppies," full of vim and vigor and neoconservatism. He said he couldn't communicate with them. He said it had gotten beyond him. He quit going, and so did I.

Now my minimal contribution to the party is occasionally to admit to being Republican when they are being bashed, often for reasons I myself can't get behind. I am the sacrificial lamb at dinner parties, where it is assumed that I am in accord with whatever kind of hardheartedness is being deplored. I don't even have to open my mouth to provide a living presence to rail against. Real Republicans, the ones who might relish defending themselves, are not on the guest lists where I go, so I fill the bill, being only just slightly more lively than an effigy.

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The only way I know I'm a Republican anymore is my reaction to what goes on in government that I don't like. I tend to excuse Democrats, but Republicans make me furious. In that, we are still family.

My only excuse for walking away from a lot of fights is that it's so hard to be in the middle of the road. You see everything, or at least you think you do and then--whoops! there's something else to see. There are not two sides to every question but uncounted millions. And they keep coming.

I treasure the issues and areas on which my mind is closed. It is so easy to argue and to live from those positions. Firm ideas are ideas you can relax and lean on when you get tired.

But what happens when the people in the middle of the road just wear out and leave? Then there really are two sides to the argument. You can see the empty space between them. And left alone they will grow as idiosyncratic as the plants and animals of Australia.

There is an ecology of ideas as much as there is of flora and fauna, but someone who will chain himself to a tree will walk out of a church or a part of a line of work humbly begging pardon of bullies. Who will take care of the ideas if not us? Especially those on the endangered list. How can we leave them to the mercy of those who use them but don't love them?

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