

WHAT WE WISH WE HAD BEEN TOLD WHEN FIRST GOING INTO PRISONS

(Advices from some Quaker women volunteers who are old prison hands,
to new women volunteers, Quakers and others

- 1 Prison is, to you, a foreign country. As in any foreign country, it is wise to be quiet, observe, listen, learn the language and identify the values of the prison culture before advancing too many strong opinions or taking any drastic action.
2. Don't be afraid to define yourself clearly. You are not required to be all things to all people at all times, nor to live up (or down) to any stereotype (including the one about the sainted Quaker lady). You are entitled, moreover, to define for yourself and for others what you choose to be or not to be, do or not to do. This will take some time, but you should be aware of the need to do it from the beginning of your prison visiting. Even after you have clearly defined yourself, expect to be tested, again and again, in many ways, including sexually, morally, and religiously. Eventually, however, if you are firm in sticking to your definition of yourself, others will adjust to it.
3. Expect to meet many tremendous and valuable people in prison. Expect also to meet some champion manipulators. Do not be surprised if these sometimes turn out to be one and the same person. Manipulation is a form of survival for the powerless (a fact that women, historically, have had ample cause to know).
- 4 Especially at first, you will find it helpful as soon as possible after your prison visits, to share with a trusted woman friend the feelings generated by the prison experience. It is a rare woman who does not experience anger, fear, pain, outrage, wonder, and other strong emotions upon contact with the prison environment. These feelings, shared, can lead to much that is constructive and rewarding. Unshared, they can lead to emotional burnout and ill-considered actions. The need to share them, therefore, never ceases.
5. Expect to feel an unfamiliar, very heady and very addictive "super star" feeling, especially at first. It may arise from sexuality in a deprived environment, from the unfamiliar real power to help the helpless, or other sources. Do not let it go to your head. Remember that you will be constantly tested and probed by prisoners and staff alike, and that no leading lady's image can survive the footlights forever. If your mascara runs in the heat, remember to be real.
6. It is possible that you will feel alienated, after prison visiting, from other people who have not shared and do not understand this experience, and from the society that produced and maintains the prisons. It is a difficult ministry, but a ministry nonetheless, to share the experience and the light that you have in this area of darkness.
7. Expect to find in prisons all the corruption and evils of society, as well as all the goodness of human nature—both magnified larger than life. Therefore, resist the temptation to:
 - a) Romanticize the prisoner. If his being caged does not necessarily make him a monster, neither does it necessarily make him a saint. To assume otherwise is always inaccurate, usually patronizing, and sometimes dangerous.
 - b) Condemn the prison staff as brutes. Many of them are good people trying to do a hard and thankless job well. Perhaps almost all of them entered the prison system initially with the intention to do good as they saw it. And they are as vulnerable to being hurt by the system as anyone else.
8. Keep your eyes, ears, and gut feelings open to the possibility of allies on the prison staff. At the same time, do not be too trusting. The objective of a prison, after all, is total control of all people crossing its threshold. The nature of a prison is to make it easy for its staff to be hurtful but difficult to be helpful.
9. Expect to be lied to by everybody—prisoners, staff, administrators, other volunteers, and even colleagues working with you in volunteer programs or prison ministries. Some of the untruth is unconscious; it is nevertheless untrue. On the other hand, do not go overboard and expect everybody to lie to you all of the time. There is also honor among both the "thieves" and the "virtuous." Therefore:
 10. Learn to "trust your gut" and heed it. Develop your awareness. Go cautiously at first; awareness comes with experience. The initial prison experience might be frightening of itself. If you have stuck with it long enough for this to wear off, and you find yourself afraid of a given person, chances are that he or she may be dangerous to you. If you feel resentful at demands being made on you, you may well be being hustled. Trust these feelings, act on them, and do not feel guilty about them. If after an initial exposure you find yourself fearful of the prison environment, you should not continue to go into prisons. This work is not for everyone, and there is also a ministry in serving as a support for other Friends who are active in it.
 11. Do not under ANY circumstances bring ANY contraband into the prison, no matter how innocent the "contraband" may seem or how stupid the rule against it. For instance, a bandana or any piece of cloth that is non-prison issue may be used to make a handle for a home-made "shiv"; herb tea may be used to hide drugs; and the introduction of ANY prohibited article by a volunteer is a misdemeanor at least, and may subject that volunteer both to criminal prosecution, if caught, and to subsequent blackmail. As for rules in general, expect to find some that seem unnecessarily silly, unjust, or oppressive. Do not be afraid to protest them, to higher authority if necessary, and to try to get them changed; but never try to simply disobey them. Disobedience may have effects that you cannot anticipate, and will certainly put you in a position from which it will be that much more difficult for you to bring about change.
 12. Expect that continued exposure to prisons may bring on negative feelings such as emotional numbness, helplessness, a feeling of inadequacy or of being overwhelmed. Prisons are destructive environments, and if you do not have a supportive community, dealing with them will burn you out.
 13. It is essential, therefore, that you find a community that

will offer you a safe place to vent your real feelings and to discuss your real problems, without fear of judgment or condemnation. At the same time, that community must love you enough to reach out to bring you back when you stray onto dangerous or unproductive bypaths. Quaker Meeting at its best is such a community.

The Oversight Committee of a prison Meeting exists, among other things, to provide such a community for the Friends, inside and outside, worshipping in the prison. If you do not have such a community (and a Quaker Meeting at its less-than-best may not offer it); then you must seek out such a community or build one for yourself.

14. Expect to be sexually turned on some time early in your prison work. Almost nobody escapes this experience, from beautiful and innocent young girls to happily married (or widowed) matrons of a certain age; not to mention single women, divorcees, engaged women, gay men, and those who have foresworn all such relationships and feelings. When this happens to you, it may possibly be the beginning of something that may mature into a viable relationship in time. But it is also possible that other and less romantic but more powerful elements enter into it. When it happens to you, don't panic and don't go overboard. Examine yourself to see whether the feeling does not contain one or more of the following elements:
 - a) The sexual deprivation of prison life creates an electrical charge in the very air when a woman enters into this environment—a charge that no woman can fail to respond to or at least to feel.
 - b) The balance of power between free women and imprisoned men. One of the few milieus in our society where a woman is more powerful than a man is in the prison situation where the woman is free and the man is a prisoner. As men have long known/ but women frequently do not realize, the possession of power is a sexual turn-on. Indeed, women have had so little experience with the phenomenon, that they may not recognize the sexual overtones of power and may mistake it for love.
 - c) The inaccessibility of the man for a normal everyday relationship. This allows both parties to fantasize but commits neither to live with the results of a relationship in the real world. As long as one of them is locked up, the parties are, in a sense, safe from each other. The dark side of this is that you may be exploiting another person without being aware you are doing so—by projecting your fantasies and your needs on him or her as a promise that in the real world you cannot or will not keep. Experience exploitation.

When you are seized by this strong emotion, whatever it turns out to be—give yourself plenty of time and room to find out what it actually is before you act on it. Hang in there, and you may get over it. Or hang in there, and you may find that the fantasy does not fit the reality. Or hang in there, and let the relationship mature into something worth having, if it will.

In the meantime remember that a sexually deprived environment breeds violent jealousy and other strong emotions, and do not flaunt your feelings in ways that may provoke gossip, violence, or loss of your own or

your fellow workers' good repute, be discreet in dress and in body language. Remember that a prison, all appearances to the contrary, is a very puritanical place. If inmates and prison staff share nothing else, they share a conservative value system in sexual matters. Remember also that many men have to spend long years in this deprived environment, and that it is important for them to adjust to the realities of doing time. To quote a respected and weighty Quaker prisoner, "a close woman friend, in prison, can mess up a man's head."

15. Do not be surprised if you become overly preoccupied with an individual prisoner. Romantic attraction is only one of the roots of such preoccupation. Others are com- passion, admiration for a strong personality or a valuable talent, or a sense of perceived injustice. Try to keep a balance and not invest all of your valuable energy in one person where there is so much need in others also.
16. A woman should make a considered decision, in consensus with her family or people living in her house- hold, whether or not to divulge her address and phone number. There are alternatives, e.g., use of a Quaker Meeting House as a mail drop, or rental of a P.O. box.
17. Prisons have proved that people do not learn very much from punishment. Quaker (and human) experience proves that they frequently do learn from example. What you do in prison, therefore, is more important than what you say there. Quakers acting religiously as ministers in prison Meetings should always be mindful that our being true to the manner of Friends is far more eloquent than our preaching about it. It is especially important in prison work not to make promises that can't or won't be kept. A broken promise to a caged and powerless person is even more painful than in normal life, and it is an act of cruelty. Even worse, it will further disable the person from learning to trust, and since trust is essential for reintegration into a community, a broken promise may further alienate and destroy the victim.
18. It is important always to remember that we stand for Quaker values and Quaker process based on consensus, non-violence, truth, and a reverence for God in the individual. These values are not likely to be found in prison guidelines for volunteers. They nevertheless are the most valuable thing we have to offer to the prison and the world, and we should never allow them to be compromised, no matter how strong the pressure is to do so.
19. In spite of everything, going into prison can be a very rewarding experience. Jesus was not kidding when he said, "I was in prison and you visited me."

TO SEE OURSELVES AS OTHERS SEE US

Brainstorm of Perceptions of Women Friends in the Prison Environment

As Seen by Prison Administrators and Staff

- "Bleeding Hearts"
- Naive and over-emotional
- An unwelcome responsibility and nuisance to security staff
- Security risk because of sexuality and naivete, capable of provoking violence
- Potential carriers of contraband
- Guilty of causing discontent by promising more than we can give
- A threat to existing power arrangements; destabilizing
- Deliberately disruptive; amateur lawyers; political information carriers; legal and political activists.
- Arrogant, know-it-alls—believe ourselves to be superior and better educated
- Some see us as radicals/traitors/revolutionaries/gays/
- Communists and other "bogey women." Some even question whether we are a religious group or a plot to overthrow the Government
- Some see us as a public relations asset
- Some see us as a calming influence, and therefore an asset
- Some see our attempts to empower prisoners as a threat to their control
- Some are resentful because we're seen as the "good guys" and they as the "bad guys." This is made worse when we align ourselves with prisoners and manifest hostility to guards and other prison personnel
- Some see us as looking for a husband, a lover, or sexual excitement; losers with men on the outside
- Willing to throw away our lives on prisoners, traitors to our class/race/whatever.

As Seen by Prisoners

- Willing suckers
- Bleeding hearts
- Rich, well connected, powerful (more than we are)
- Religious fanatics
- Post (wo)men and writers of letters to the Governor
- Parole tickets
- Support system for their families
- Competition that can be used to spur their girlfriends or families to greater efforts on their behalf
- Obligatory martyrs to their needs (or, if we decline to be this "bad Quakers" and hypocrites)
- "Commie weirdos," radicals, revolutionaries, lesbians
- Neurotics; bored women with endless time
- Sexual targets or objects
- Man-hungry; hung up on caged men
- Troublemakers
- Naive
- Sexual teases
- Over-romanticized "good women"
- Link to different realities
- Sole link to outside
- Some want religion from us
- Some value us as people they need not be tough with
- Some try very hard to understand what we bring
- Some see us as people to protect
- Some feel we are people with whom they can feel some power
- Others see us as acting as Ladv Bountiful and resent our rubbing their noses in their own powerlessness
- In sum, we are seen as sluts or saints—no middle ground.

As Seen by Other Volunteers We Work With

- Non-Quaker volunteers see us as elitist, exclusive, controlling, not sharing power—purveyors of a myth in support of this attitude (Quakers have some mysterious quality beyond the reach of ordinary mortals).
- Some welcome us as women in a male environment
- Some see us as strong, relatively fearless and persistent
- Some see us as objects of jealousy—we are perceived as infringing on their territory or their prisoners
- Some see us as radical
- Some admire us and look to us as teachers and leaders
- Some see us as distrustful of others, prone to hidden agendas and secret relationships
- Some see us as hard-selling our own concepts
- Some see us as having our own code of how women should

As Seen by Male (and Even Some Female) Friends

- Some see us as sexually and romantically eager; sexually attracted to violence and other seamier sides of life.
- Perhaps because of these perceptions, some see us as a threat to their own image of sanctity in the eyes of the world.
- Some Friends feel threatened by what they feel is a loss of their control over Quakerism as they know it or have always conceived of it, as a result of the prison ministry in general and the role of women in it in particular.
- We are seen as a group to watch—a target for surveillance.
- But we are also seen as valuable assets; brave; appreciated for carrying the weight of the prison ministry and testimony.
- Some male Friends are supportive of us.
- Others are willing to believe the worst of us; and to act on the belief in an authoritarian way as they can get away with, without consulting us first.
- There is a tendency for male Friends to identify with male prison administrators—they are too easily co-opted into prison values and policies. They tend to be seduced into acting as policemen for the system, forgetting to adhere in adversity to the tested manner of Friends. When this happens, the first casualty is our way of life; the second casualty is our ability to offer anything of real value in the prisons; and there are usually individual human casualties, too—Friends, prisoners, and prison staff.