

The Value System of Friends

Martin Cobin

This pamphlet contains the message of Martin Cobin to the Southern Appalachian Association of Friends at its 12th Annual Conference held at Cumberland Camp grounds, Crossville, Tennessee. during the weekend of 1-3 May 1970.

The Value System of Friends

Undoubtedly you and I in one respect or another violate our own value systems. Such violations may be interpreted by those who wish to use the label as examples of our hypocrisy, I prefer to interpret them as examples of our humanity. My preference is not so much the result of an instinctive craving for self-comfort. It is rather the result of my observation of men and my study of history. A value system is not a description of all the details of our lives nor of every decision made in moments of choice. A value system is, rather, a standard by which we measure the desirable and the undesirable, the good and the bad of all actions and choices, including our own. Hypocrisy exists, and as I perceive it merits a sense of guilt, when we proclaim one standard of evaluation but actually apply a different standard in making our decisions. It is not the individual act or choice but the general pattern of these acts and choices which reveals our actual values. And it is the consistency of that general pattern regardless of exceptions and admitted mistakes, the consistency of that general pattern with the value system we articulate, which tests our integrity.

2.

It seems pertinent, therefore, to inquire as to whether Friends articulate a value system. I think we do, individually and organizationally. As an organization we have an image which is the consequence of our history, our corporate action, and the impact made by individuals who are identified in terms of their organizational membership. It is this image which articulates a value system. That which is articulated, like the image itself, is dynamic, is affected by our individual behavior, and is to a significant degree outside our personal control.

Historically, the image projects a value system with which we are all familiar: a belief in that of God in all people; a conviction that each of us lives in direct communion with God; a concern for the welfare of others; and a commitment to simplicity, personal integrity, and the power of Love. Our corporate action is consistent, or inconsistent, with this historical image to the extent that the Friends who interact with one another in formulating corporate action seek to, and are able to, make it consistent. And this in turn is determined by the degree to which the value systems of individual Friends are or are not consistent with the historical image. Inherent in the historical value system is a high tolerance of individual diversity. If I believe God speaks to you as well as to me, if I respect your personal integrity, and if I relate to you in Love, then I have no alternative but to accept the propriety of your making different choices - and engaging in different actions from my own.

There is no logical necessity however for me to accept as a Friend, that is as a member of the religious organization, everyone I accept as a human being. I can love and respect those whose value system is inconsistent with my own and still perceive it is inappropriate for all of us to belong to an

organization that articulates a value system with which some of us disagree. Admittedly we must be cautious and loving in determining whose value systems are inconsistent with what. This is why it is always the wisdom and insight of the group to which we turn. And this is why, historically, we have emphasized the overall pattern of life rather than the individual act, choice, or expression.

Do We Live in the Manner of Friends?

3.

Historically, the Society has tested the individual Friend by asking "Do you live in the manner of Friends?" That is a meaningful test only when there is a communal awareness of what it means to live in such a manner. Traditionally the meaning has been a life of simplicity, personal integrity, concern for the welfare of others, a loving relationship with one's fellows, and a sense of communion with God.

4.

I think it is obvious that in order that we live in this manner of Friends it is not necessary to belong to the Religious Society of Friends. Nor, for that matter, to any religious society. If we seek a rationale for organizational membership, therefore, we must find it in organizational behavior. For Friends this involves a variety of recurrent and occasional activities. Regularly recurrent are the meetings for worship and business and the less frequent fellowship experiences of Quarterly and Yearly Meetings, and gatherings such as we have here. Occasional, are the coming together of Friends from around the world, or the corporate witnesses in response to specific situations and needs. There are also ongoing institutional activities conducted in the name of the Society of Friends, such as the American Friends Service Committee and the Friends Committee on National Legislation.

Organizational affiliation becomes meaningful as an identifying activity only to the extent that the individual considers this identification as helping himself or others to function in the manner of Friends. I can express this in different terms by saying that the only reason for me to go to Meeting for Worship is to facilitate my own capacity, or the capacity of others, to live in the manner of Friends. Similarly, my support of the Friends Service Committee is a consequence of its being a channel through which I or others can participate, in the manner of Friends, in the life of the world community. I think, therefore, we have certain individual obligations to one another with respect to our organizational identifications. If our individual values ever become inconsistent with the organizational values, we should not insist on identifying with the organization and making it over into our own image. I don't mean that organizational values must be fixed; I do mean they must change only as the values of the entire group change. Admittedly, such change is slow. This is necessary. This is necessary if we are to employ the organization to help one another rather than to manipulate one another.

I perceive our actions as helpful when we join an organization with an attractive value system image and re-enforce each other in making our lives consistent with that value system. I perceive our actions as manipulative when we join an organization with a value system image attractive to most of the membership but not to ourselves and attempt to make fundamental changes in that value system so as to bring it into agreement with our own. When we are helpful rather than manipulative the value system will change only as the life experiences of the membership result in new insight.

Divergent experiences normally result in differences of insight. Some of these may lead an individual to feel that his needs are no longer fulfilled within the value system of the organization. In such a case I'm suggesting that when his needs are unique he should leave the organization,

perceiving the changes in his pattern of growth and losing nothing in feelings of mutual love and respect for those whose growth pattern has been different.

Other differences in insight may lead an individual to feel that his actual pattern of living and perhaps the life patterns of many others as well is not consistent as had been thought with the organizational value system. In such a case I would suggest the need for loving dialogue, the motivation and form of which would stem from the organizational value system itself. I think this is what happened when John Woolman engaged in loving dialogue with the Friends of his time.

5.

What is the actuality of our individual value systems? How consistent are our corporate actions, influenced by our individual values, with the historical values which still characterize our organizational image? These are questions of considerable significance to us. I think contemporary Friends differ from early Friends with respect to personal value systems far more than some of us feel comfortable about, and far less than many of us are inclined to think, to fear, or to hope.

I don't feel that our lives are characterized by simplicity in the anecdotal sense of traditional Quaker life styles. But I do find evidence of a value placed upon simplicity beyond that of the dominant culture in which we live. There is perhaps more material wealth among Friends than some would desire. I find no signs of vulgar display or self-assumed virtue associated with it, however. As a group we tend not to measure worth in terms of wealth. We maintain a simplicity in our method of worship which some find not only unattractive but actually painful. Nor do we assume this simple manner of worship with the gritted teeth of a self-defined martyr exposing his bare skin to a hair shirt. Most of us actually feel more comfortable and relaxed with the simplicity. Indeed I hear from Friends far more expressions of concern about meetings which are overly complex or verbal than I do about meetings which are overly simple or silent. Whatever our divergences of practice, I believe we still evaluate the meeting for worship with an expectation of simplicity being a virtue.

I am sure there are exceptions of the grossest kind but I would characterize the organizational structure of most monthly meetings for business as being simpler than those of most other religious groups in our community and as appealing to the individual Friend in direct relation to their simplicity. From my point of view I think there is a need for much greater simplicity in our lives. But I also feel when I move among Friends that I move among people with an appreciation of the value of simplicity and a greater than normal capacity to achieve it.

I find a high level of personal integrity among Friends. Perhaps my experiences have been unusual or I have been blind to certain realities. Regardless, I have this opinion. I have also found most Friends to be gentle people. Indeed there is no doubt in my mind but that the initial appeal of Quakerism for me was my perception of the personal characteristics of the Friends I met and came to know. Here, too, I will acknowledge the presence of exceptions. I am, myself, more often than I care to admit, an exception. But I'll be able to find little sense of community with other Friends, regardless of worship format or social out-reach, if I ever perceive most Friends as people to be lacking in gentleness and in loving tenderness for one another.

I believe the concern for human welfare is the most dominant characteristic of contemporary Friends. It is this characteristic which often robs us of our ability to achieve simplicity; prods us into a sense of guilt about our inability to be more responsive to social problems; and makes us so sensitive to the concerns of each individual within the group as to frustrate those who seek immediate and extensive attention to the concerns of those outside the group. It is this concern for human welfare in fact which leads some of us to such a sense of urgency and even desperation as to weaken our fiber

as gentle people. Perhaps, too, it is this concern for human welfare which attracts to us many wonderful people who share this concern but who do not share a great deal else of our value system.

I believe if we are honest we must admit to some real doubt as to the degree to which, as individuals, we have a sense of communion with God. Many of us do not have this sense of communion. We seek it but fail to find it, and in response to this failure we focus primarily on other aspects of our identity as Friends. Inherent in this is the potential for two kinds of tragedy. One is the tragedy of failing to benefit from the strength and reinforcement which comes from such communion. The other is the tragedy of division between those for whom the Society of Friends is primarily a religion and those for whom it is primarily an agency for social action. Such a division would be tragic because it would reflect an inability to live by our professed values. It would demonstrate in short the presence of hypocrisy.

6.

I am not, in this discussion, concerned with the individual who wandered into the Society of Friends unaware of its value system (as many do) and then came to the realization that he could not in honesty revise his own value system. Such a person leaves the Society, just as many of us have left one group or another with which we have sojourned for a time in search of a home. My concern here is with the people who intellectually accept the value system, who fail to absorb it completely into their life style, and who concentrate their efforts on that portion of the value system which seems applicable. The difficulty here is that the value system is not divisible.

Let me say it again for the sake of emphasis: the value system is not divisible. Simplicity frees one of the clutter that interferes with communion with God. Communion with God relates each of us to the God within ourselves and within one another. The relationship we achieve to that of God within ourselves gives us our integrity. The relationship we achieve to that of God in one another gives us our love and concern for one another, and the love and concern for one another combined with our sense of integrity enables us to distinguish the important from the unimportant, the significant from the trivial. Finally, it is this easy capacity to discriminate which removes much of the complexity of life and enables us to achieve simplicity in the midst of what seems like great confusion.

No, the value system is not divisible. For the individual Friend who accepts the value system as his own, there can be neither a communion with God which fails to manifest itself in a loving concern for his fellows nor a concern for his fellows which is not responded to with all the spiritual strength derived from his sense of communion with God. As Friends we cannot differentiate our religion and our social action. At this moment in history – with an organizational image which is a product of the past, as well as the present, influenced by the activities and perceptions of those with whom we identify ourselves – we cannot, without hypocrisy, belong to the Religious Society of Friends and at the same time separate religion and social action.

7.

In my conviction that this separation is impossible for us, I perceive the need for contemporary Friends to intensify their personal involvement with the total value system. Let's not content ourselves with developing more fully that which we are best able to do. Let us rather strive to develop those aspects in which we feel least able. There is a natural tendency, which we must resist, to avoid the difficult. The young pianist often prefers to play and perfect the selection he has learned rather than to start on another selection with a new set of problems. The student of a foreign language often prefers to re-read the passages already translated rather than to labor through new passages With new vocabulary and new syntactic structures. The farmer often prefers to plow the old field rather

than to break sod for a new one. The pianist must master all the techniques, however. If you would be fluent in a language you must study just that vocabulary and just those structures not yet mastered. If the farm is to be a productive one we cannot select chores on the basis of their difficulty or ease of accomplishment. I would urge us as Friends therefore to look to our total value system, and to cultivate most actively what has longest remained fallow.

If my advice is followed and if my assessment of the Society of Friends is correct, which it may not be, the largest number of us will set about developing our religious experiences: obtaining greater insight into the mystic dimensions of Quakerism; seeking and achieving direct communion with forces which we find pervasive, uplifting, and strengthening and which – as such – we can operationally define as manifestations of God.

I may be in error. Perhaps there are a greater number of Friends in need of simplifying their lives or of becoming involved directly in social action or of developing their own personal integrity. Whatever it may be I am convinced that we should seek to be wholeheartedly committed to an indivisible value system, and by being so to increase our individual and organizational capacity to live in the world in the manner of Friends.

Application to Problems Confronting Friends

8.

Against this background I'd like to explore with you a number of specific problems which are likely to confront Friends recurrently if not persistently in the years ahead. My list is not exhaustive but it may serve sufficiently well to illustrate the practical applicability of the orientation I have presented. With this end in view let's consider four problems: (1) requests for blank check support; (2) involvement with those holding contrary value systems; (3) our influence potential with regard to the shaping of history; and (4) the quality of our personal lives.

9.

The request for blank check support is a request by a group in obvious need that we respond to their need with a major allocation of our resources completely independent of any knowledge of the use to which the resources will be put. Such a request is based on a number of assumptions that we have committed ourselves to helping those in need; that as a part of the dominant culture we have contributed significantly to the need itself and must bear the responsibility for it; that if there is any reality to our assertion of trust and confidence in others, we should be able to trust others to use our resources as they see fit without a supervisory attempt to force our own value systems upon them; and that we have no unique claim to, or control over, that part of the world's bounty which may be in our keeping in any particular moment. I call this a bank check request because it seems to me that whatever logic justifies the granting of the request equally justifies the repetition of the request so long as the resources continue to exist.

Now how do we respond to such a request in the manner of friends? How do we relate to this request our simplicity, personal integrity, concern for the welfare of others, loving relationships, and sense of communion with God? I think our loving relationships will lead us to consider the request with the utmost care. I think the extent to which we have been successful in living in the manner of Friends will have divorced us sufficiently from the dominant culture so that in comparing ourselves to the group making the request we will not consider the request within a psychological atmosphere of personal guilt.

If we have in fact lived in the manner of Friends our pattern of responsiveness to the needs

around us should leave us at any given moment, including the moment of this request, with far fewer resources than are required to meet the variety of existing needs. At the same time if our concern for the welfare of others is real, it cannot be limited or restricted. Consequently, we will have no alternative other than to be selective in the use of available resources. Selectivity is always difficult, often painful. When there is not enough food to avoid starvation, to whom should the food be made available? The more difficult the decisions the more we are in need of a sense of communion with God. The more difficult the decisions the more we are in need of silent meditation of careful group deliberation carried on in an atmosphere of spiritual seeking, of tenderness to one another, of sensitivity to the scope of human needs.

At such moments we must rely on the pooled wisdom and leadings of the group, and we should test the group decision, not by its correspondence with any particular position or perception but by the quality of the process by which it was formulated. Inherent in such an approach to a decision is the inability to predict the nature of the decision which may in one given instance be different from in another instance. In no case, however, can such a decision be merely a consequence of who made the request first, or how the request was worded.

10.

Involvement with those holding contrary value systems is unavoidable. The question is not whether it should happen but, where this can be controlled, under what circumstances should it happen? A good example of this is the demonstration against the Vietnam War in Washington, D.C. Friends who participated in that demonstration knew there would be an association with people who did not embrace the techniques of nonviolence. Friends who refused to participate in that or supportive demonstrations knew that they would be associated with those committed to militarism. The official absence of Friends from the Washington demonstration would have had as clear a significance for many people as the official presence of Friends.

There was, in short, no way to avoid involvement. Nor is there any way to avoid criticism, either externally or internally. Some people who are willing to associate with the military in determining alternatives to military service and in establishing medical services for the people of Vietnam are highly critical of association with groups which do not reject violence in expressing their opposition to our country's military commitment. Some people who are willing to associate with extremist groups if they are on the approved extreme, and who will accept their use of unacceptable methods if they are related to approved motivations or objectives, are highly critical of any relations with the authorities or procedures of the Establishment.

How do we extract ourselves from this dilemma? How do we escape the conflicting thrusts and pressures? I believe the answer lies in our instinct as people who live in the manner of Friends, to be positive rather than negative in our orientation. If we are moved by love rather than by hate, if we seek to strengthen rather than to weaken, if our concern for human welfare is a concern for all human welfare, the guidance that we seek and the channels that will be open to us will reflect fundamental spiritual commitments rather than temporary political expediency. The point I seek to make here is that, our basic concern should not be one of reacting to what others may think or do but of acting out of our own internal value system. Out of our love and concern, out of our clear perception of values, out of our meditation and searching together should come a call to action and a sense of ease in doing what we are called to do. The basic test cannot be made in relation to others, it must be made in terms of our sense of responsiveness to one another and to the leadings of the Spirit.

Once again it is the process of decision making which is of utmost importance. Either we believe in the power of love or we do not. Either we seek for guidance or we do not. If we do not believe, we do not live in the manner of Friends. If we do believe, we cannot reach out to others with preconceived notions of how they should behave. We cannot seek to manipulate one another. We cannot determine for ourselves that to which we should be guided.

11.

Our potential influence upon the shaping of history often seems so inconsequential as to leave us depressed. We have not given up, obviously, but we have moments of great frustration which at times drive us to actions which we would otherwise find uncomfortable. At such moments we are in a very real sense mentally ill. In such a condition there is a great need for us to be gentle, sympathetic, and forgiving with one another--just as we are with anyone caught in the grip of a painful disease.

Beyond gentleness, sympathy, and forgiveness, however, I believe there is also medicine available for those who can live in the manner of Friends. The medicinal benefits are derived from the realization that the struggle to influence history must have a justification in terms of the value system of those involved in the struggle. As soon as we realize this, we shift our focus from the military and political arena of history to the social and cultural arena, and we realize the significance which must be attached to the quality of our personal lives.

It is possible that we may sense greater progress and a greater capacity to influence events in the social and cultural arena, given the broad perspective of history over long periods of time. Even if this is not the case, however, there is an important consequence to the recognition of *why* we struggle : the awareness that we must not lose what we are struggling for in the process of struggle.

Let me make my point here by pretending and asking you to pretend, for a short time only, that you support the war in Vietnam. Suppose I ask you why this is so and you answer because you wish to weaken the forces of Communism. If your answer is honest and if I can prove to your satisfaction or dissatisfaction that the war itself is strengthening Communism then you would seek some other method of achieving your ends. But what if you are not being honest? What if your real reason for supporting the war is because you are reaping great financial profit from it? Then all my proof of the impact of Communism would really be irrelevant would it not? To change your behavior I would have to prove to your satisfaction either that the war would actually result in a financial loss for you if carried on for another two years or that it would deny you the opportunity to make much greater profits from a situation that could be achieved only if the war was to be discontinued immediately.

Now I realize that such proofs are difficult to come by but I think my hypothetical examples establish my point: we will not knowingly seek to obtain something by the use of methods which destroy what we are seeking.

12.

Let us return to the actuality of our own present condition. Why are human beings worth struggling for? What's your honest answer? Whatever it is, then ask yourself whether your methods of struggle are destroying just those qualities which motivate your struggle. The honest answer for one who lives in the manner of Friends is that what we struggle to preserve is that of God in people – their capacity for love, their concern for one another, their personal integrity, their appreciation of the simple things of life.

We might go on to consider the nature of these simple things that merit appreciation. For myself, they would include laughter, clean water, blue sky, fresh air, the touch of a woman, the gurgle of a

baby, the quiet fall of snowflakes through the mountain pines, the leaping foam on a rocky coast and more, more and much much more. For these I would struggle, for these I would seek to influence history. And because this is the motivation and the goal, I cannot in the process of struggle lose my capacity or destroy the capacity of others to be human in these ways which make human beings worth struggling for.

Perhaps this is why in the last analysis, as I have already indicated I cannot separate my own desire to be identified as a Friend from my assessment of the personal quality of Friends as individual human beings. This is why I find the future of the Society of Friends, as an organization, dependent on the extent to which we who would be identified with it live in the manner of Friends.

About the author:

Martin Cobin was born and grew up in the East (New York City), received his higher education (through the Ph. D) in the Midwest, and prefers to live in the West (Colorado). He became a member of the Society of Friends after marrying a member of the Madison, Wisconsin, Meeting. They have four children, three daughters and a son.

Martin has served as Clerk of three Monthly Meetings: Morgantown, West Virginia; Urbana-Champaign Illinois; and Boulder, Colorado. He has been asked to speak at a number of Friendly gatherings and several of his talks have been published – including his first address to Illinois Yearly Meeting which appeared as the Pendle Hill Pamphlet entitled “From Convincement to Conversion” and his Rufus Jones Lecture delivered at Arbor, Michigan, in the fall of 1970.

It was during Martin and June Cobin’s sojourn with the Southern Appalachian Association of Friends in May 1970, that the Association took the momentous step of becoming the Southern Appalachian Yearly Meeting and Association.

At the time of publication of this pamphlet Martin Cobin had gone on a two year leave of absence, 1971-1973, from his position on the faculty of the University of Colorado. He was living in Tokyo with his wife and their son, Peter, serving on an American Friends Service Committee assignment as Quaker International Affairs Representative for the Quaker International Affairs Program in East Asia.

Martin Theodore Cobin

October 20th, 1920 -November 1st, 2014

Obituary, Western Friend <https://westernfriend.org/memorials/martin-theodore-cobin>

Martin Cobin passed away in Louisville, Colorado, on November 5, 2014, quickly, peacefully and at home, as he wanted. He was born in New York City to Rose and Joseph Bernard Cohen on October 20, 1920.

Martin married June Peterson during World War II and served in the occupation of Japan at the same time that he was starting a family. The images of war had a profound effect on him, and thereafter he strove to use artistic expression to create compassion and understanding.

He received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin and went on to teach speech, communication, and theater at West Virginia University, the University of Illinois, and the University of Colorado in Boulder. He became a director, producing director of, and occasionally an actor in the Colorado Shakespeare Festival.

Martin grew up Jewish but left Jewish practice as a teenager, already questioning the conflict between the sense of belonging and excluding others. While he was away at war, June joined the Society of Friends in Madison, Wisconsin. Martin found that Fox’s teaching that there is that of God in everyone spoke to his condition and became active in the Madison Meeting. Later he started a Quaker Meeting in Morgantown, West Virginia where he lived. When they moved to Urbana, Illinois, he became a member of that Meeting, and transferred his member to Boulder Meeting in 1962.

He came to Quakers as a seeker of a different concept of God, a concept that embraced inclusivity, community, and justice. It was important to him that we accept that he was a non-Christian Quaker and all his life he avidly studied the world’s religions. He found God in the power of relationships. Martin was Clerk of Intermountain Yearly Meeting, and of Boulder Meeting, and served on many committees: AFSC, Peace & Social Justice, Right Sharing of World Resources, and Native

American Concerns/Indigenous Peoples Concerns.

Martin's lifetime search for a sense of relationships and belonging made him a deeply introspective man. His interests were humanistic and world-wide and he studied passionately the impact of communication on human affairs. He succeeded translating the fruits of his search into action at home and in his extended travels.

He and June spent several years with the AFSC's International Affairs, East Asia project and a year as the directors of Casa de los Amigos in Mexico City. Martin marched in Selma, Alabama, taught Alternatives to Violence in prisons, and was always especially concerned about Native Americans and indigenous peoples all over the world.

Over his long life, beside textbooks in his field and plays Martin wrote a Pendle Hill Pamphlet, a couple of manuscripts about his understanding of God and religions, several books of poetry, and eventually a novel near the culmination of his life. The deep bonds of love, friendship, and mutual understanding that Martin shared with his wife June, who died in 2010, were his constant companions. His faithful inward search for truth, for what it means to belong to a group without being exclusive, for understanding and being understood, for communicating the truths given to him, were an inspiration to many of us.

Martin is survived by his children, Lyn Gullette, Gail Moscoso, Kit Warner, and Peter Cobin, and by 7 grandchildren and 11 great grandchildren, and a sister, Leonore Fleming.

A Meeting for Worship to celebrate Martin's life was held on November 16, 2014. Martin was an extraordinary man who lived a full and rich life. He touched the lives of many others, and he will be missed.