

Defining a Prisoner

These bars tremble
With the rage of our captors
These walls drip
With the tears of their guests
They surround me
Taunt me
Enclose me
They define me
As what I am
A prisoner

*Brigid Egan-Pimblett
Vancouver Monthly Meeting*

*“The only dream worth
having...”*

*is to dream that you will live while you're alive
and die only when you're dead..*

To love. To be loved.

To never forget your own insignificance.

*To never get used to the unspeakable violence
and vulgar disparity of life around you.*

To seek joy in the saddest places.

To pursue beauty to its lair.

*To never simplify what is complicated or to
complicate what is simple.*

To respect strength, never power.

Above all, to watch.

To try and understand.

To never look away.

And never, never to forget.”

Arundhati Roy from her book
The Algebra of Infinite Justice

Submitted by Meredith Egan

From Prison Abolition to Penal Abolition:

The Ongoing Work of Friends
Who Share a Concern for Justice

Meredith Egan

In 1981 Canadian Friends gathered for their Yearly Meeting and reached unity on the wording of this statement: Friends Response to Crime. The statement clearly articulates our concerns with prisons and the effects of imprisonment. It was based on Friends' lifelong concerns for prison conditions, and for the use of incarceration to perpetuate society's inequality rather than to meet its need for justice.

Since the earliest times in the Religious Society of Friends, the time of George Fox and Elizabeth Fry, Friends have visited prisoners, advocated on their behalf and worked to bring changes to both legal and prison systems. This arose out of their experiences in prison. Many Friends were incarcerated after they consciously broke laws that were contrary to their understanding of testimonies of faith. In those days some members refused to doff hats to authorities. Some refused to bear arms or tithe, knowing the funds would support warfare. They too were imprisoned.

Friends refused to swear oaths led by the biblical verses found in Matthew 5:34-37, "But I say to you, do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No', anything more than this comes from the evil one." In plain speak, to swear an oath of loyalty or honesty implies that there is more than one level of honesty possible. Friends assert this is not so and continue to affirm the truth rather than to swear oaths.

Friends chose to use plain language which embodied equality rather than reinforced a class system. They met in Meetings to assess the harm individuals had suffered, and later sought redress for this harm. These Meetings for Suffering were held in a manner of worship we still use today. All of these activities were deemed criminal, and resulted in beatings, torture, loss of property (including land and livestock) and incarceration in horrible conditions. As well, the arrests and sentences