

June 23, 1985

An experience I had several days ago brought to mind a memory from the past.

The memory had to do with a time, perhaps 25 years ago, when a group of peace activists were conducting demonstrations at New London, Connecticut, where nuclear submarines were being built. Using canoes and other craft of very modest dimensions they sought to blockade the newly launched submarines' way to the sea.

I was not involved with this group, but one time when traveling from Boston to New York I stopped in New London, thinking only to lend some volunteer support for a day, and to find out in general what was going on. I wandered into the storefront headquarters of the peace group. There were no submarine launchings or canoe convoys planned for that day. The organizers took one look at me in my square business suit and decided that it was meant for me to go up on the heights, where the managers and engineers of the Electric Boat Company lived, and canvass from door-to-door, explaining the perspectives of those who were conducting the peace action to local people. Somebody drove me up the hill in a jalopy and deposited me at a corner in a very quiet neighborhood of new looking split-level homes and wide lawns, gave me a pile of pamphlets, and told me that they would come back and pick me up in the same spot about four hours later.

A person who answered one of the first doorbells I rung admitted me. I found myself in a comfortably furnished living room. Television was a relatively new phenomenon at that time, and like many living rooms, this one was organized around a very large console TV set. Sofas and chairs were arranged in a kind of semicircle facing the video screen, as in a theater or a church. But what I was not prepared for in my canvassing was that on top of this console TV set, as if on an altar, was a large and meticulously detailed model of a nuclear submarine.

In my naivete I guess I had imagined that people would keep these instruments of death and destruction upon which they were so lucratively engaged decently hidden under a rug. The fact that they might actually be proud enough of them to put them on display simply was a new idea to me, and in the instant that I saw the model of the submarine something deep in my subconscious clicked, and although I had a very civil and even friendly conversation with the person who was kind enough to admit me into her home, there was, nevertheless, at this very deep level a role-awareness of myself as the indignant activist and the person I was visiting as the hopelessly implicated housewife. Although both of us were well enough trained in civilities, probably very little real communication took place, either in that house or for the rest of the afternoon, as each party to the conversations departed from them mainly with a sense of self-satisfaction for their own broad-minded tolerance.

What brought this recollection to mind was a public demonstration which I and a few other members of this Meeting joined in front of Senator D'Amato's office to protest his affirmative vote for aid to those seeking violently to overthrow the Sandinist government in Nicaragua. A fairly substantial group of demonstrators had gathered on the sidewalk outside the building in which the Senator's office was located. There was a picnic-like atmosphere as demonstrators, many of whom may not have seen each other since the last demonstration, circulated amongst themselves chatting enthusiastically and cheerfully. Various signs absentmindedly carried by some of the demonstrators proclaimed the

group's disaffection from the actions taken by both the United States Senate and the House of Representatives. From time to time one or another part of the group would start a familiar song: "Ain't gonna study war no more," or "Johnny row your boat ashore." This was a cozy-in group. The passers by were "out there". The music, the signs, the atmosphere, and in most cases the garb, of the demonstrators seemed to reflect the assumption of well-established roles.

Contemplating this brings to mind the somewhat different characteristics of a Quaker silent vigil as a public witness activity. Placards with slogans are dispensed with so as not to stimulate in the minds of passers-by internal debates based on their habitual modes of thought. The vigilers, rather than chatting with each other about their own commonly held interests, stand instead in silence — a silent, listening awareness which reaches out to the passers-by and incorporates them into a consciousness of the significance of the present moment. The vigilers practice an inner silence through which they lay down all their limited identities — as parents, as peace activists, as social work administrators, as indignant activists, or whatever other self-limiting identity might wish to impose itself on them. Instead, they present themselves as waiting in openness, in silence, in unity and in the expectation of truth. And by releasing self-limiting roles and seeking the profoundest sources of truth, the unifying truth which binds the cosmos together and which illuminates humankind's role in the unfolding drama of the Creation, they make a space which invites the passers by to do so also; space where sensitive souls who may come within range are offered an opportunity for recollectedness and for moving beyond habit-induced roles and attitudes.

Can we do anything useful by standing in a vigil or a demonstration? What could be more important than moving beyond "we" and "they" role-playing and affirming that there is wisdom inherent in every human being, that the universe is filled with information, that there is a meaningful answer inherent in every question, and a solution to every problem. To move beyond separateness is to become enlightened by all things.