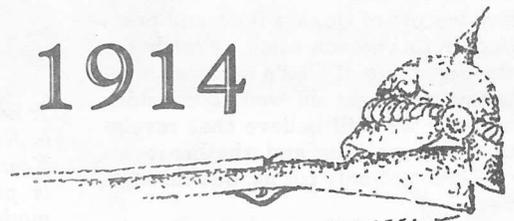


Silent Night, 1914

by Chuck Kleymeyer



The story I am about to tell you is true. It was told to me by a small white-haired Quaker as the two of us waited in line at the United Nations to hear Henry Kissinger address the General Assembly. Fall was fading into winter and the nations of the world were at each other's throats. While children went hungry and their tiny brains lay dormant in large skulls, their brothers and fathers shot, bombed, and otherwise mutilated one another on battlefields and in city streets.

My newfound friend spoke to me of his frequent visits to the UN to observe nations talking at one another about their conflicts. He told me also of his efforts over the years both in his native Britain and his adopted U.S. to halt or prevent violent discord between groups of human beings.

As we stood talking, a man on the other side of me broke in with what

many would consider an ingenuous question. Speaking English with difficulty and emphasizing each word, he asked my new friend, "Why do you think people fight wars? What brings men — like you and me — to want to destroy one another over their differences?"

A member of the Madison Meeting, Wisconsin, and an attendee of the Friends Meeting of Washington, D.C., Chuck Kleymeyer is the Ecuador Field Representative for the Inter-American Foundation, an organization which supports grass-roots development efforts throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. He holds a B.A. in Creative Writing from Stanford and a Ph.D. in the Sociology of Socio-Economic Development from the University of Wisconsin. In addition to his writing, he is a mime and a storyteller. But he says that above all this he is the father of a seven- and eight-year-old.

My friend leaned his head back and smiled. "If I could answer your question, I would be famous." He threw a quick glance at me. "Like your Mr. Kissinger!" We joined him in his laughter.

"Well, I cannot answer your question," he went on. "But let me tell you a story instead." This, then, is his story:

"In 1914 I was a young man just out of school. I didn't know much, least of all what I wanted to do with my life. But I did know one thing. I wanted nothing to do with the ominous war that had begun that year — what we now call World War I. I was an objector.

"Life forces its contradictions on one, however, and I soon found myself on the front as a noncombatant . . . a stretcher-bearer to be exact . . . with the Welsh Regiment of Fusiliers. That was 60 autumns ago.

"Oh, it was dreadful. Cold, wet, brutal. Moreover, no one on the front lines really knew what he was fighting for. Or against. After all, Europe was barely into the 20th century. Nations were generally ignorant of one another. Radio and the airplane were new inventions. And if you traveled, it was by horse or ship or steam locomotive. Not very fast and rarely very far. Even the city dwellers were provincial. And there we were, all of us green young fellows, shivering in desolate trenches way over on the Continent.

"The shaking was only partly due to the cold. Smoking bombs fell near us. Friends were torn limb from limb. And you see, we couldn't really say what for. After all, as the officers told us, we weren't there to think but to fight. So the soldiers fought, primarily to stay alive, and we stretcher-bearers carried their broken bodies back to the hospital tents. It was that simple. That terribly simple.

"December came and I longed for that miserable war to be over so that I could go back to Wales. Little did I know what awaited us! Such is life. I remember feeling hollow and bewildered. And as long as I live, I'll never forget that first Christmas at the front. There were few of us who didn't want to be home, safe and sound, roasting chestnuts on the hearth, eating meat pies, and spiriting a piece of plum pudding off to bed on Christmas Night.

"The morning of the 24th we walked about with grim looks on our faces. Christmas Eve, and we at war. We may not have been very worldly, but we knew a bit about life . . . and now about death. We weren't boys, after all, but men: blacksmiths and shepherds, waggoners and farm hands, masons and clerks. War was no lark for us, and we clearly saw the irony in shooting and being shot at on the anniversary of Christ's birth. We still had our humanity, you know. We were no Christmas bombers.

"In any case, evening inevitably came and after a special ration of dried meat and corn bread, I went out with B company to help keep a few small fires going while they manned the trenches. The night sky was like obsidian, glistening from countless points of starlight. And as we talked, we could see one another's words billow out in small clouds of breath that faded into the night along with the sound.

"We were all feeling, in our misery, even more solidarity than usual and a deepening distaste for where we were

and what we were doing. Midnight was approaching. For some time there had been quiet. We had no heart for confrontation or for even keeping up the pretense.

"I stared deep into the night towards the German lines. There was little detectable movement there either. And yet I felt uneasy, as always. Who could feel at peace with his world at such a moment?

"Down in a trench, I huddled my arms and legs together, trying to feel as much as possible like a small group of friends, and I blew warm breath into my hands. Then something caught my eye and I looked up. Off to my right a man had stood, his helmeted head facing the heavens, his thin body silhouetted against the stars. And then this heedless figure began to sing! As the first heartbreakingly beautiful notes reached me, I recognized the fine tenor voice of Wells, the cooper's helper. He sang as he had never sung before:

SILENT NIGHT . . .
 HOLY NIGHT . . .
 ALL IS CALM . . .
 ALL IS BRIGHT . . .

"Each note of each phrase struck deep into me, into the farthest reaches of my troubled soul. Without a thought of danger, I, too, stood. Transported, I felt a strong breath rush into me and the words soar back out in accompaniment,

'ROUND YON VIRGIN,
 MOTHER AND CHILD . . .
 HOLY INFANT,
 SO TENDER AND MILD . . .

"Tears welled in my eyes when voice after voice joined in, swelling the sound as in a cathedral and sending the song out into the cavernous night:

SLEEP IN HEAVENLY PEACE . . .
 SLEEP IN HEAVENLY PEACE.

"Such a singular occurrence was not apt to end so quickly as it had begun. We all began again to sing this familiar first verse. After the second round something happened that was even more extraordinary. Floating back through the cold night air came the sound of the German troops answering us,

STILLE NACHT . . .
 HEILIGE NACHT . . .
 ALLES SCHLAFT . . .
 EINSAM WACHT . . .

"Imagine! Our 'enemies' had joined us. The longings of brothers had

locked arms. We sang with new joy — and new sorrow:

'ROUND YON VIRGIN,
 HOCHHEILIGE PAAR . . .
 HOLY INFANT,
 IM LOCKIGEN HAAR . . .

"The song rolled back and forth across the no man's land. The distant voices gathered into one rising surge of wishful lament:

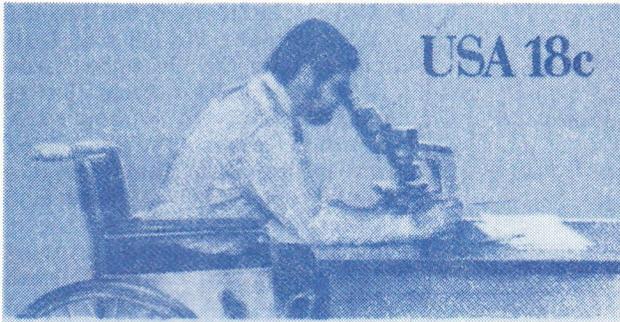
SLEEP IN HEAVENLY PEACE . . .
 SCHLAF IM HIMMLISCHER RUH.

"Over and over we sang these resonant and simple lyrics until we were hoarse and emotionally spent. Then we went further. We climbed out of the trenches to do what one does with brothers — fraternize. All that night we sang and laughed and traded rations and gifts from home. German beer flowed as freely as British ale. Chocolate bars were pressed into our hands and we reciprocated with sticks of cinnamon and peppermint. Those of us from each side who knew a few words of the other language acted as stumbling interpreters, causing great hilarity. The dawning of Christmas Day found some of us dancing to a mouth organ, others smiling broadly as they pulled out tattered pictures of family members and girl friends to pass around in the pale rays of morning light.

"When we arrived back at camp, our rising officers were furious. They threatened to throw us in the nearest stockade and to have us court-martialed. Only the fact that it was Christmas saved us . . . and rightly so. We were ordered to maintain total silence about the incident. Similar occurrences were not subsequently heard of (though I later learned, of course, that this was neither the first nor last such event in human history!). You know, it must have been the same on the German side. And what's more, in our case, the press back home never printed our story. Thus, most of our people heard nothing of what had happened faraway on the battlefield, one silent night in nineteen hundred and fourteen."

My friend smiled softly and looked away. Deep inside me his story swept about, leaving trails of feelings wherever it went. The conversation around me turned back to high-level diplomacy. But I was still seeing and hearing those young men on their perilous frozen field. Nothing could tear my thoughts from this small piece of history, from the enormous story that this lively wisp of an old man had told.

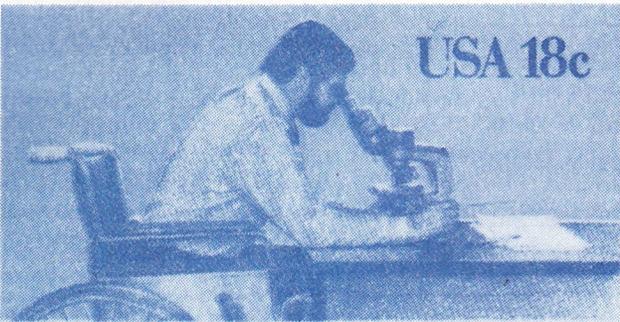
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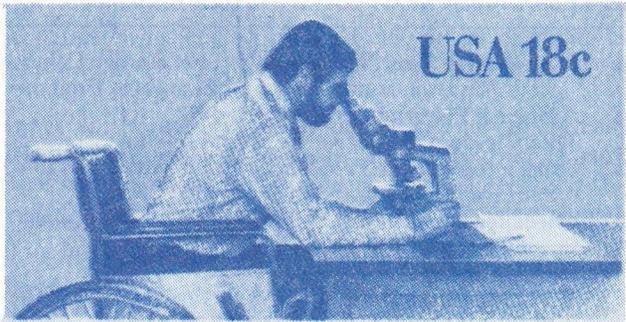
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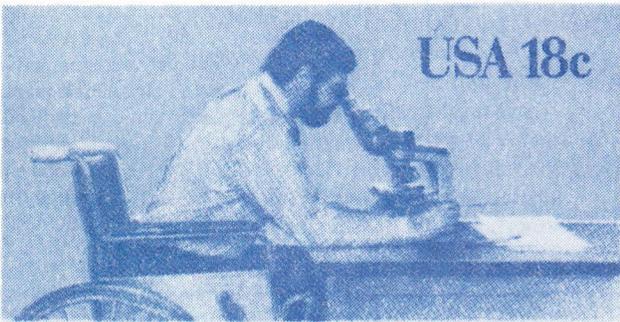
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Quaker Life

December 1981

Disabled doesn't mean unable . . .

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About The Cover

1981 is the International Year of Disabled Persons. We are glad that we could focus the December issue of *Quaker Life* on this theme. It gives us an opportunity to see how some individual Friends and Friends families are coping with disability. It also gives us a chance to check on how Local Meetings are ministering to the disabled. As we looked at the situation, one pattern did emerge — where individuals and families are coping well, the Local Meeting touches their lives in a significant way. We are grateful to be allowed to reproduce on our cover the stamp design which is copyrighted by the United States Postal Service and used with their permission. The gifted design work of Carol Beals and Susanna Combs is evident throughout the magazine.

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