

PENDLE HILL

Wallingford, Pennsylvania 19086

MEMORANDUM:

TO: Executive Board
and Staff

DATE: July 23, 1993

FROM: Dan Seeger

CC:

SUBJECT: Building Pendle Hill's Future

One of the most important parts of my job as your Executive Secretary is to support you---the Board, committees and staff of Pendle Hill---in your efforts to understand any difficulties we face which hamper our effectiveness in carrying out our mission, and in your efforts to devise successful strategies for overcoming these difficulties.

My work in this area of problem solving should have two dimensions, at least. First, I should contribute thought---identifying problems, offering perspectives about them, and proposing solutions. Second, I should encourage participation. An organization needs more wisdom than any one Executive Secretary can muster. While I should contribute thought, it should remain tentative until others have had a chance to contribute their thoughts. Alternative ideas about what our problems really are might be more illuminating and persuasive, and others' ideas for solutions more creative. But an Executive Secretary ought make no apology for taking the initiative and for being as specific as possible in opening up questions. Creative thought by others would really not be stimulated by vagueness and uncertainty on my part.

As we work together on problem-solving we should keep some general principles in mind. Our effort at understanding problems and developing strategies for addressing them must be focused on root causes, rather than on symptoms. We should deal with issues and problems which tend to be perennial or generic, which tend to haunt, rather than with the one-time disaster, the fluke, the occasional lapse. The solution reached should be stated as a kind of principle which can be applied in a general way throughout the life of the organization by independent people using

their judgment, rather than as a complex set of detailed "rules and regulations" backed up by a lot of close supervision. Finally, the principle or solution arrived at should be such that its conscientious application will make the haunting problem go away, or will at least greatly diminish its impact.

I have not functioned in this realm as your Executive Secretary until now because it is not something one can do without some detailed knowledge, without some serious observation of the life of an organization or a community. Now that I have been here for slightly less than two years I feel prepared to begin offering the sort of help that I was really hired to provide. The purpose of the present memorandum is to begin this process of corporate reflection with respect to what I believe to be one of the perennial issues of Pendle Hill's life.

But two things ought to be stated before proceeding to a consideration of the particular issue.

The first is that problems an organization or a community faces can be of two kinds. One kind is external. Something outside the enterprise threatens or undermines it due to no fault of its own. Perhaps a change in the world economy erodes its revenues or sales. The outbreak of peace can, paradoxically, leave a peace organization at sea. An oil crisis may make the smaller cars of foreign competitors suddenly more attractive before an indigenous company can re-tool to compete. One thing we are trying to figure out here at Pendle Hill, for example, is whether or not changes in the economy have materially reduced the number of people who can consider taking ten, twenty or thirty weeks off from work and, while suffering a loss of income, also pay our tuition in order to participate in the Resident Study Program.

But very often an organization's problems are internal, stemming from inadequate understanding among its people of the realities it faces, or from bad habits of the heart which undermine the way they ought to function together if the organization is truly to thrive. Such internal problems can be seen as problems with the organization's culture, that is, with the system of conscious ideas and unconscious habits and emotions which define how the people within it interact with each other, and which also define how they react to the external realities which the enterprise faces.

The second thing that should be stated is that, to the extent that an organization's problems are of the internal sort, the problem is apt to be difficult to define, and the solution, the new general principle which must be applied, is apt to be controversial.

The reason that the problem is apt to be difficult to define is that, as with all sociological observations, there is a need to generalize, and the generalization, while accurate and useful, will not exactly fit every particular situation it covers. One

might generalize about the culture or attitudes of fundamentalist Christians, perhaps about their approach to gay and Lesbian persons, or of the Pentagon, perhaps about its attitude towards authority, in ways which are quite accurate and useful for understanding what is happening, and yet one's generalization may not accurately fit any particularly television evangelist, armed forces colonel, or military platoon.

The reason why the solution is apt to be controversial is that people very often believe in what they are doing--thank goodness--and a suggestion that the culture or habit system they are enacting is dysfunctional in some significant respect is naturally apt to go against the grain.

With these preliminaries stated, the haunting or perennial issue I would like to address is what I sense to be an abiding ambiguity or confusion about the principles through which Pendle Hill is governed. The key symptom of this in the past has been a recurring breakdown in trust among various elements of Pendle Hill, a feeling by staff that they are not being heard, and the flowering of a grief-filled climate of gossip and resentment. This obviously can have serious effects on morale, on staff functioning, on Pendle Hill's effectiveness in carrying out its mission, on student recruitment, and on fund-raising, although as far as I can ascertain, Pendle Hill has managed in some degree always to come through in spite of these problems, although not without budget stresses and resulting staff cuts.

When I first came here I was given to understand both by staff members and committee members that Pendle Hill had recently been traumatized by a very serious manifestation of this array of interrelated problems--lack of trust, feeling unheard, grief, bitter gossip and resentment. If I could conclude that this was a one-time problem related to a non-recurring historical circumstance, there would be no need to dwell upon the matter, except in ways that would encourage wounds to heal. However, from my own direct observation I have concluded that the seeds of these problems are still very much present, quite visible, and waiting to germinate once they are "watered" by any of the accidents or disappointments which are inevitable in any group's or individual's life.

I would like to offer a hypothesis about this problem, its origin and its solution. I believe it is an internal problem, that is, a problem with our organization's culture, with the habits of mind and heart that color our relations with one another. Therefore, given the difficulty mentioned above of defining it exactly, and given the controversial nature which any proposed solution is apt to have, I would like to offer this analysis as a provisional hypothesis and my proposed solution as a provisional solution. I suggest that, while we may wish to discuss these ideas at greater or lesser length, we basically simply keep them in mind as we pursue our common life over the next eighteen or twenty-four months, testing them to see if they "ring true." They may be more or less right or wrong. Obviously, I have enough confidence in them to write to you all about them. But I, too, will be seeking to see if actual experience

upholds their validity or tends to suggest a modification of the theory. Others may wish to do the same.

The hypothesis is as follows: The things most people are apt to talk about in connection with this set of problems--lack of trust, feeling disempowered, unheard and ignored--are not the fundamental problem. These experiences are real, but they are only symptoms. They cannot be made to go away unless the fundamental problem is solved. The real problem is that, for its spiritual and practical health, an enterprise such as Pendle Hill needs unambiguously to be governed by its lay decision-making bodies, and this principle, although paid lip-service in our organizational culture, is actually held in very low esteem.

My first impulse when contemplating making this assertion was to document how this holding of the principle of lay governance in low esteem is so--that is, how it manifests. However, I have decided not to do this, since it would look too much like finger-pointing, and I do not think there is any benefit in that. I have complete confidence that people are acting with all good intentions, and there is little to be gained by dissecting instances, an exercise which might seem more accusatory than illuminating. Suffice it for me to say, in a very summary way, that what I have termed lack of esteem for the principle of lay governance manifests both on the level of thought and philosophy, as well as in the practical sphere. On the philosophical level, certain ways of thinking about community, about feminism, and even about Quakerism often contradict the principle of lay governance; and on the practical level, careful attention would disclose a variety of small and large procedural evasions of the principle, again unintentional, I am convinced.

I should also acknowledge that the water is muddied by the fact that the administration can lapse and can fail to provide opportunities for staff to be heard in decision-making situations, and that therefore sometimes grief is justified, and is not due to problems of philosophical confusion about the principle of lay governance. At least once since I have been at Pendle Hill I found myself shepherding a major proposal (for a revised building plan) from a sub-committee to the Board without staff having had a chance to consider it. The problem was solved in this instance by slowing the process down to allow time for staff discussion. There may have been other lapses as well.

Nevertheless, while acknowledging this lapse, and possibly others, I am also concerned that the philosophical currents to which I have alluded are indeed real, as are the procedural evasions of the principle of lay governance. I am concerned about this because, unless more clarity is achieved, past cycles will repeat themselves in spite of everyone's best intentions, including my own. If decent and honest people trying to collaborate are playing by different rules, but imagine they are playing by the same rules, grief, perceived betrayal, and mistrust will inevitably result. As I have indicated, I believe the cost of this to Pendle Hill is very high: there is a cost

to our spiritual condition and our ability to witness to Truth, the most grievous cost; but there is also a substantial cost to our fiscal well-being, and therefore to our program's growth and strength, and to the security of the livelihood of the staff.

At any rate, to the extent that there is interest in testing this "provisional hypothesis," it occurs to me that there would be five logical next steps.

First, there should be developed a statement of why, for practical and spiritual reasons, it is important that Pendle Hill (and other similar organizations) be unambiguously governed by lay committees. I have attempted to do this in a preliminary way in the accompanying draft essay. This is a discussion paper more than anything else; I hope it will stimulate other people's thoughts about the governance of Pendle Hill, and that we can reflect upon these matters together and with the advantage of having all possible perspectives on the issue in view.

Second, the community as a whole might wish to keep the hypothesis in mind for the next eighteen to twenty-four months, examining, each time a significant issue in our common life arises, whether responses enthusiastically uphold the principle of lay governance, grudgingly offer obeisance to it, or simply ignore or evade the principle.

Third, procedural ways for staff and students to get concerns before committees, or for staff to express reactions to issues before committees, ought to be clearly defined and made known. Such procedures should protect the committees' right to control their own agendas, that is, protect them from being inundated with matters they do not regard as important; yet the procedures should also ensure that all significant developments in the life of Pendle Hill are sanctioned in worshipful deliberations by lay bodies only after staff views have been heard.

Fourth, the countervailing philosophical issues which tend to undermine and distract attention from the need to practice careful discipline about lay decision-making--approaches to community, to feminism, and a certain way of regarding Quakerism--ought to be carefully explored so that the true principles that any of them have to offer can be reconciled and blended with the practices and disciplines needed to sustain lay governance.

Finally, to the extent that there is interest, the issues raised above and in the accompanying document should be discussed in staff and in committees, with a view to eliciting alternative interpretations which might illuminate the same experiences, and to drawing together as wide a spectrum of views as exists, preliminary to focusing on establishing a new principle, or new culture, which will avoid the grief, the programmatic dysfunction, and the fiscal reversals brought on by breakdowns in trust.

There is an extent to which some of these same issues of governance lie behind the difficulties we experienced in the Spring 1993 term. I have not dwelt upon the Spring 1993 term in the attached material because I have in preparation a separate series of reflections upon that experience and its implications for the future. I realize that two such documents represent a great deal of material for people to digest and react to, but I am hoping that this will be eased by my struggle to circulate them during the summer, when, hopefully, people have more leisure to consider such things.

I will be grateful for whatever attention Friends and colleagues can give both to the accompanying text and to the one which will follow because I believe each seeks to address issues which are very significant for Pendle Hill, its mission, and its future.