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Paul Azevedo

The Reactor

The Power of a Letter...

What do Eileen Dzielak, Kent Crovisier, Bill Crist, R.E. Meyers, Joe Fulford and Paul Azevedo all have in common? Besides our common humanity and our city of residence, not a lot. But all of us are the kind of people who fire off a letter to the editor when something gets under our skin or we feel something needs saying.

And we all, in common with many other Pacificans, resent injustice whenever and wherever it appears. This column is a glorified letter to the editor. Marching or picketing isn't my style. Sitting down to a typewriter is more like it.

So you can imagine how I felt the other day when I was privileged to hear Coralee Arganini, a volunteer with Amnesty International, explain how that group works. She told the Pacifica Rotary Club how, "merely" by flooding oppressive governments and police authorities with polite, courteous letters about particular individuals who are "prisoners of conscience", Amnesty International has gotten prisoners released, or persuaded jailers to improve conditions. Sometimes they just reduced the amount of torture. A modest gain in torture-free days may not seem like much, but imagine if you were the prisoner involved.

If you are the kind of person who responds to injustice with anger and a desire to do something, you can help.

Amnesty International is ruthlessly impartial, not siding with right-wing torturers or left-wing torturers; fighting with public opinion both communist and right-wing dictatorships when they oppress those who don't use or advocate violence, but who are "prisoners of conscience." How would you feel if "they" sent you to jail and perhaps tortured you for raising a glass in a restaurant or bar and drinking a toast to freedom of conscience. That kind of thing happens.

Do letters help? Here's a quote from a released prisoner of conscience from the Dominican Republic. "When the first 200 letters came, the guards gave me back my clothes. Then the next 200 came, and the prison director came to see me. When the next pile of letters arrived, the director got in touch with his superior. The letters kept coming and coming: 3000 of them...The President called the prison and told them to let me go."

That's the power of the personal letter, the kind you can write.

The organization stresses that letters be polite and courteous. It's OK to let off steam by writing a nasty letter to people who undoubtedly deserve it. Write it, tear it up, and write another, one that is courteous and polite. Your goal should be the well-being of the prisoner, and his welfare, not letting off steam.

Amnesty International is headquartered in London, with the American office in New York. In San Francisco the office is at 3618 Sacramento St. Phone 563-3733. If you can write a letter to the editor, you can write a letter that may change the life of a suffering human being who is being terribly abused.

What I like about Amnesty International is the idea that words on paper, carefully chosen, sent to the right place, can help a fellow human being who would otherwise suffer anonymously, with no hope.

Torturers, like hyenas, do their best work in the dark.