

INTERVIEW WITH BERNARDO M. FERDMAN, PH.D.



By Jonathan Gale, Ph.D.

Q: When people who know of you hear “Bernardo Ferdman,” they think diversity. How do you think you came to be known as the “diversity guy?”

A: I’ve been teaching, writing, doing research, and consulting on diversity for over 20 years. Diversity in its various forms is at the core of my interests and work, and I am very passionate about it. As an immigrant to the U.S., as someone who has lived in different places, and as a member of multiple minorities, I’ve learned that there is great value in recognizing and appreciating both similarities and differences. Also, psychology can only be a complete science of human behavior if it describes and attends to people from all groups, and not only a select few. For these reasons, I have focused my professional life on trying to learn more about the ways in which



diversity can be an asset for individuals, groups, and organizations. I have been particularly interested in the complexities and multiplicity of identity and in the ways in which Latinos and Latinas in the United States challenge traditionally compartmentalized notions of identity.

In 1987, I created a graduate course focusing on diversity in organizations that I’ve been teaching almost every year since then, and which hundreds of graduate students have taken, first at the University at Albany, SUNY, and since 1993 at the California School of Professional Psychology – which became Alliant International University. Of course, the course has evolved with the field, which has grown tremendously. It has been a privilege to work with the students as they discover their own perspectives on the issues and begin to apply these to their professional and personal development. In 1992, I helped to organize a major preconference symposium on diversity at the annual meetings of the Academy of Management, in Las Vegas. Over 100 people participated, and it was a huge success. In conjunction with that event, I edited *A Resource Guide for Teaching and Research on Diversity*, published by AACSB (at the time, American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business), as a way to collect information for those seeking to teach or do research in the area. Since then, I’ve continued to be very active in the field of diversity.

In reality, I am only one of many people who focus on diversity and inclusion in organizations. Many, if not most of us, are active in the Gender and Diversity in Organizations Division of the Academy of Management, a division that I had the privilege to chair in 2004-2005. There are also many psychologists, for example, active in APA’s Division 45 (Society for the Psychological Study of Ethnic Minority Issues), who have contributed a great deal to our understanding of the psychology of diversity.

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Q: In addition to your role as Professor at the Marshall Goldsmith School of Management at Alliant International University, what are or have been your professional involvements?

A: I work as a consultant in the area of diversity and inclusion, as well as organizational and leadership development more generally. I've had the opportunity to support groups and organizations that want to find ways to include and make better use of the talents of all their people. One part of my work that I'm especially passionate about is supporting the development of Latino and Latina leaders in organizations. A key part of that process is giving people the tools and the permission to be fully themselves at work. Often, I'm asked to speak to different groups about diversity and inclusion, Latino identity, or Latino leadership issues. For example, in July I gave the opening address for the 2nd Brazilian Congress of Work and Organizational Psychology.

As I mentioned, I have also been quite active in a number of professional societies. For example, I was President of the Interamerican Society of Psychology from 2001 to 2003, and I'm part of the editorial board for the Professional Practice Series published by the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. I also wrote a regular column on diversity and inclusion for SIOP's publication, *The Industrial-Organizational Psychologist*, between 2001 and 2004.

Q: What else can you add about your primary work-related interests?

A: I love the applied aspect of my work, in terms of being able to make a difference for people in organizations. Lately, I've been working with my students to develop a measure of the experience of inclusion at work. I believe that fostering inclusion, the degree to which people feel safe, appreciated, valued, engaged, and able to be authentic at work – both as individuals and as members of multiple identity groups – is a key competency for diverse groups and organizations. In our research, we are seeking to document the behaviors and other conditions that predict the experience of inclusion, as well as the difference that this experience can make for work outcomes.

Q: I understand you will be starting a regular column in the Newsletter. What can our readers expect?

A: I hope to provide insights regarding the dynamics of inclusion amidst diversity – how can we stretch our perspectives regarding how inclusion is created and manifested and the difference it can make in our personal and professional lives?

Q: Can you give us one tidbit about diversity that might relate to psychologists in private practice or as organizational consultants that we can take away?

A: It all starts with ourselves. To be able to help others manage or work with diversity, I first must work on my own ability to behave inclusively and to work with people who are different from me. I also need to know and appreciate myself, and to seek comfort with and acceptance of who I am, in all its complexity, rather than trying to be someone else. By modeling self-appreciation, I believe I can better accept and appreciate others. Indeed, in our initial research on inclusion, we found that people who reported that they behave inclusively toward others in their workgroup were also much more likely to report that they themselves experienced inclusion in that workgroup.

Thank you! The Newsletter looks forward to hearing more from Dr. Bernardo Ferdman. ☒



INCLUSION STARTS WITH KNOWING YOURSELF

By Bernardo M. Ferdman, Ph.D.

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As psychologists, we have learned that we ignore multiculturalism and diversity at our peril, because if we are interested in understanding and predicting human behavior, we must do so in the cultural and social context in which it occurs. The literature on the implications of diversity for psychology has grown exponentially in recent years, and in 2003, the American Psychological Association published its "Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists," a very useful document for learning more about how we can and should address racial and ethnic diversity in our work. Psychologists who wish to learn more about cultural differences or multicultural competencies now have excellent resources at their disposal. Indeed, today multicultural competencies are essential for any practicing psychologist.



In spite of these developments, we still have much to learn about how we can proactively use diversity as a source of learning and advantage – both for ourselves as individuals, and for the organizations with which we work. The key to this is inclusion. In my columns, I will seek to explore inclusion and its various facets, particularly focusing on how we can cultivate inclusion for individuals and organizations, and the positive difference this can make. Inclusion is both about how people behave and about the organizational context in which that behavior occurs, and creating inclusion requires action directed at both levels. An inclusive organization is one in which "the diversity of knowledge and perspectives that members of different groups bring to the organization has shaped its strategy, its work, its management and operating systems, and its core values and norms for success" and where "members of all groups are treated fairly, feel and are included, have equal opportunities, and are represented at all organizational levels and functions" (Holvino, Ferdman,

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& Merrill-Sands, 2003, p. 249). Similarly, a “culture of inclusion recognizes, respects, values, and utilizes the talents and contributions of all the organization’s people — current and potential — across multiple lines of difference. In organizations with cultures of inclusion, people of all social identity groups have the opportunity to be present, to have their voices heard and appreciated, and to engage in core activities on behalf of the collective” (Wasserman, Gallegos, & Ferdman, in press).



Inclusion means going well beyond understanding or working successfully across multiple differences. At the individual level, it means finding ways to connect to our own full self as well as to that of others, and helping to create the conditions so that we

and others can feel safe, appreciated, valued, engaged, and able to be authentic at work, both as individuals and as members of multiple identity groups. When I am included as a full participant in a collective, I can then bring my full contribution to bear on behalf of the whole.

To be able to give permission to and encourage others to be fully themselves, I must first be able to do that for myself. How can each of us do that? How can we begin to draw on more of our full selves in our work, and to do so in a way that allows us to feel integrated, authentic, and empowered, and our groups or organizations to derive the associated benefits?



A key first step in this process is for each of us to know more about our own self and the multiple social identities that contribute to making us who we are.

Many of us, especially if we belong to groups that are more powerful or dominant in society, may prefer to think about ourselves in terms of our uniqueness or individuality, rather than in terms of our memberships in social collectives (e.g., those based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, age, religion, etc.). Yet, these two perspectives do not need to be seen as opposing each other or as contradictory, because those social identities are important in making us who we are. The key is understanding that we belong to many identity

groups and that these contribute to making us who we are in complex and interacting ways. Indeed, it is the particular configuration of those social identities that makes each of us a unique individual (Ferdman, 1995). Yet, at the same time, we can recognize that within each of those identities we may share some aspects with other members of that group. In this way, I can begin to recognize both my own individuality and to see it in the context of a particular configuration of social or group-based identities.

To begin this process, I encourage readers to make an identity map that includes a list of as many of their social identities as possible, including both given identities and chosen, acquired, or external identities. *Given identities* are those that we typically do not have much choice about and that we receive by virtue of being part of certain social groups at birth or that come to us later. (Examples include dimensions such as gender, nationality, race, age, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical ability/disability, and family status and roles such as “oldest child,” “brother,” or “widow.”) *Chosen, acquired, or external identities* are those we selected or otherwise gained relatively voluntarily. (These include, but are not limited to, aspects such as education level and background, marital and/or parental status, appearance, geographic location, occupation, work experience, political affiliation, hobbies, and in many cases religion.)



Once you complete your map, answer these questions:

1. Which of your identities and characteristics are the most obvious and/or important to others at work?
2. Which of your identities and characteristics, especially those that are important to you, are either relatively hidden or less known at work?
3. How clear are you about the different aspects that make you who you are? Why?
4. Which identities might you like to integrate

more into your self at work? Why?

5. How comfortable and/or uncomfortable are you in sharing more of yourself at work? Why? What conditions have helped or would help you share more?

6. How might bringing more of yourself to work create added value for you and others with whom you work (whether co-workers or clients)?



7. What can you do to bring more of yourself to work? What can you do to support others in bringing more of themselves to work?

Perhaps, after you have completed and reflected on this exercise, you will have new insights about how to take steps toward more inclusion for yourself and others. Happy journey!! (And remember to share some of those insights with others at work, and if you are so inclined, with me, at bferdman@alliant.edu.)

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SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND INCLUSIVE INTERACTIONS



By Bernardo M. Ferdman, Ph.D.

In my column last month (Ferdman, 2007), I suggested that a key enabler of inclusion is knowing more about ourselves and the multiple social identities that make us who we are. This month, I expand on that idea by connecting it to another critical component of inclusion: using our self-knowledge to facilitate effective and inclusive interactions.

All of us constantly receive messages about different social groups and their members – not only based on our experiences, but also from the media, books, people with whom we interact, and the world around us. These messages and ideas often turn into stories, prejudices, stereotypes, and other internalized and over-generalized representations that we can easily confuse with reality. By being clear about our own identities and their importance and meaning to us, each of us can better avoid confusing our own feelings, thoughts, and desires related to those identities with projections from others.

When I can understand who I am and what that means to me, I can also be clearer with other people about what I want and need as it relates to my identities, without wanting or expecting them to read my mind or to make decisions on my behalf. Paradoxically,



developing my sense of myself as a member of multiple groups can also free me from seeing myself or allowing others to see me as representing a whole group. By gaining a sense of the nuances and textures of how my group memberships play out in my own life, and learning how to talk about this with others, I can avoid seeing myself or having others see me through the lens of stereotypes.

So, for example, in my own case, being a Latino and a Jew are both important parts of who I am. To the extent that I am clear

with myself about what those two identities mean for me, particularly as they interact with each other and with other identities, I can more easily tell my own stories about myself that acknowledge and honor those identities while expressing them in personally meaningful ways. I don't need to represent or be just like other Jews or Latinos, and I don't need to see myself as any "less" Latino or Jewish because I am different than whatever the other people's (and my) prototypical or stereotypical image is for members of those groups. It also gives me a way to speak with others about what it means to be a Latino Jew (or a Jewish Latino) that feels genuine and authentic, rather than one that is focused on responding to others' stereotypes and assumptions.



So, how does this connect to interacting inclusively with others? Once I can see myself both as unique and as a member of multiple groups, and I can talk about these identities to others in ways that I feel good about, and I have better tools for seeing and talking to others in similar ways. When I can begin to honor and show curiosity about other people's identities, without trying to force my own preconceptions on them, I am well on the way to engaging in more inclusive interactions. By sharing about myself, by asking good questions, by being genuinely curious, and by encouraging and then letting others tell their own stories in authentic ways, I give the message that I do not expect others to fit into my preconceptions,

that I care about them, and that I value real communication and dialogue.

Sometimes, we may try to create inclusion for people with whom we work or interact by focusing on our similarities. This is often helpful, because it can give us a sense of connection and common purpose, at least temporarily. However, a more powerful approach to inclusion is one that does exactly the opposite. By



expecting and valuing difference, and by not expecting other people to be like us (or like our image of what people “like them” are supposed to be), we can help create a space that both allows us to define ourselves and gives the same gift to others. Gurevitch (1989) wrote convincingly about the power of “making strange” and allowing ourselves to “not understand the other.” By doing this, we can allow others to define themselves, their identities, their histories, and their needs on their own terms. Inclusion means that we continue to engage and collaborate with others even when we do not fully understand them.



Inclusive interaction is about engaging with others in ways that encourage them to be fully themselves, and doing that by being fully ourselves. Doing this well and doing this consistently takes practice, patience, skill, thoughtfulness, and willingness to learn and grow.

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**I/O Corner:
The Slippery Slope of Inclusion**
Bernardo M. Ferdman, Ph.D.



I am a firm proponent of the idea that inclusion can provide critical benefits to workgroups, to organizations, and to society (Ferdman, 2007a, 2007b; Ferdman & Davidson, 2002b). I think that when – in our work and life – we engage multiple points of view, listen to many voices, and consider various alternatives, our options and therefore our results are likely to be better, especially collectively.

And certainly, I prefer inclusion for myself – I want to feel safe and cared about, my voice to be solicited, heard, and valued, and my contributions to make a positive difference in my workgroups and in my organization. I want to be able to be fully myself at work, rather than to feel that I have to suppress or minimize identities that are important to me, and I do not want to feel that the social identity groups I belong to or their members are demeaned, stereotyped, or excluded.



Yet, in spite of this belief, as much as I dislike admitting it, my thoughts, feelings, and behavior often fall short. Yes, I certainly value inclusion in theory. But often, when someone I work with says or proposes something I find odd, different, or inconvenient, my defenses easily go up – sometimes slightly and other times more forcefully. After all, I view myself as a reasonable, thoughtful, and open-minded person, I usually weigh and think through the issue at hand (I believe), and now, this other, seemingly contrary point of view or request is causing trouble! How annoying and how frustrating!

Believing in inclusion is easy. Truly engaging with and practicing inclusion can be inconvenient and challenging. The process can push our buttons and, whether gently or forcefully, move us out of our comfort zone. This is one of the paradoxes of inclusion. On the one hand, inclusion is about creating more comfortable, fluid, and engaged participation for more people, including ourselves. At the same time, because the process of inclusion involves engaging across differences, the very same people (i.e., also ourselves) must also learn to live and work with increased discomfort. Inclusion requires everyone to stretch. Inclusion calls for using “muscles” and skills that

are rarely needed when the focus is on conformity, assimilation, or homogeneity.



Regularly doing new forms of physical exercise can bring us benefits in the form of increased strength, more flexibility, and better health, though to reap these rewards we must be willing to go through periods of soreness and sometimes even a bit of pain. Similarly, practicing inclusion can enhance personal and collective growth and performance, but only if we are willing to work through the fears and difficulties that are also part of the package. When we expand our individual and collective boundaries to incorporate new and different voices and therefore to consider possibilities beyond those we are already accustomed to or comfortable with, we need to deal not only with the possible discomfort of adapting to something new and unfamiliar, but also with the unease brought on by uncertain parameters and seemingly fluid boundaries that must continually be renegotiated (Davidson & Ferdman, 2003; Ferdman & Davidson, 2002a).



This paradoxical experience is particularly magnified for those in dominant or more powerful groups (Davidson & Ferdman, 2002). Those who are already at the center of the organization or whose voices are already regularly included may have to stretch further than they are used to doing. Indeed, members of minority or subordinated groups are already accustomed to being the ones who must blend in or adapt, and to the experiences of discomfort that can come with that; the comfortable feelings associated with inclusion may be relatively new for them. Yet, in most cases, most of us combine elements of dominant and subordinated identities in one way or another, and our awareness and practice of inclusion may not always be as expansive as we might like to think. For example, the very same person in a group who advocates for attending to cultural differences or the needs and perspectives of people with different sexual orientations may be much less sensitive regarding issues of disability. The individual who has had to fight long and hard to have her voice heard may, once people begin listening to her, not be fully prepared to listen to others, especially to those whom she previously categorized as her oppressors.

And those accustomed to the simplicity of doing things “the way we always did them” may start feeling quite ill at ease and even marginalized when called upon to reexamine and reconsider what they see as the most familiar and seemingly well-functioning processes in their group or organization.



“When will it end?” people want to know. “When can we get over inclusion and get back to work?” The true answer is that there is no end-point to inclusion, and that can be one of the most scary parts of all. Recently, I was informally consulting to a manager who asked my input as he prepared a communication for his staff to remind them of important dates for the coming year. I urged him to include mention of the Jewish High Holy Days, since I remembered that in the past, his organization had often scheduled key meetings on one of those days, leading to conflicts between work and faith for Jewish employees and clients. The manager’s initial response was, “If we start there, there is no end. What about the Muslim holidays, the Buddhist holidays, and all the other groups’ holidays?” His notions of fairness and consistency, including his belief that the organization should not

highlight one group’s holidays and therefore seemingly exclude others, meant that he was willing to leave things as they were. I couldn’t help wondering, though, whether part of his reaction may not also have stemmed from the same place as my own annoyance when people bring up requests and needs that will both take non-trivial work and will lead us into unknown and unfamiliar territory. Part of the fear may be that if we break down familiar boundaries and rules, then we will be left with no rules and no boundaries.

It is true that when we do proactive work to include a specific group, others will also be likely to speak up and ask to be considered and included as well. Yet, if the goal is to increase inclusion, participation, and engagement – and this particular manager’s organization promotes multiculturalism and inclusion as fundamental values – then this is a discomfort and challenge that we must readily take on. When the fear of sliding down the slippery slope, or (to mix metaphors) of opening the floodgates of fairness and inclusion, leads us simply to stay with the status quo, then we also collude with maintaining the hidden biases and preferences that lurk there. The challenge for many of us, especially if the status quo provides stability and a basis for effectiveness, is to try new, different, and inconvenient approaches, quite possibly could feel like unnecessary turbulence on what would otherwise be a smooth trip.



Ultimately, we must go beyond individual preferences and our personal comfort and consider group and organizational imperatives. It is certainly true that the more we work on inclusion, the more likely it is that we will feel pushed to go even further. Using an analogy from the high jump in track and field, Miller and Katz (2002) urge groups and organizations to continually “raise the bar” on inclusion so as to be able to truly obtain the benefits of diversity.

This will require me, the manager in my example, and all those who sometimes get frustrated, annoyed, or uncomfortable with the call to heed and then to accommodate different ideas, needs, and practices to continue to learn, develop, and engage in dialogue. We must take pause, listen to and hear other voices, and recognize that, to the extent that we foster inclusive practice as the norm, not only will we be maximizing the chances of better results for our workgroups and organizations, but also we may be the beneficiaries the next time we bring a difference that we believe should matter.

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I/O CORNER: INCLUSION AND CULTURAL TRANSITIONS



By Bernardo M. Ferdman, Ph.D.

This past summer, I spent three weeks in Buenos Aires, the city where I was born and lived the first seven years of my life. By all expectations, I should have felt right at home, and in many ways I did. The most salient feeling in that regard for me was how comfortable I felt talking and connecting with everyone, from family members to taxi drivers. I enjoyed sitting in cafes, people-watching, window shopping, and simply walking around. The second time I went to the gym, it seemed natural when the trainer (a man) kissed me hello (typical among men in Buenos Aires in social settings), and I spent a lot of time socializing with friends and family over meals and coffees, something I rarely do at home in San Diego.

Returning to San Diego, the contrast that was most immediately salient to me was the physical distance between people. Even people who see each other every day don't kiss or even shake hands or hug hello. And this seemed connected, at least at first, with some degree of psychological distance. Somehow, without that type of warm physical greeting, I felt less close and less open with people, compared to how I felt in Argentina (or with the same people in San Diego before my trip). In San Diego, and in the U.S. more generally, everything seemed to be business as usual. Everyone had a schedule, something to do and someplace to be, and stopping for a hug, a chat, or a coffee wasn't permitted to stand in the way. In Buenos Aires, I loved that waiters never rushed me, and that even as they maintained a respectful distance, they connected, asked questions, and made human contact. In contrast, when I returned to San Diego, it felt like people had less time and interest in talking and connecting, something I had not thought about much before the trip to Buenos Aires.

In any case, I quickly adapted back to my old habits, and after two or three weeks at most, I found that it again felt relatively normal to wave hello to someone from a distance — without stopping to shake hands, kiss, or hug and to talk for a while — as we passed each other at the gym, at work, or at my children's school. Standing five feet away from someone while having a conversation no longer seemed quite as awkward, and I no longer missed lingering in conversation with others for quite as long over dessert or coffee. Indeed, even in situations in which the other person wanted to hang out a bit, I found myself rushing or marking boundaries.

In a way, it seemed strange to me that, somehow, upon my return to San Diego, I quickly fit right back in. And it was also noteworthy how in Buenos Aires, as comfortable as I was, there were also many times when I missed the comfortable feeling of how things work in San Diego (at least in those contexts in which I'm comfortable).

“To the extent that people increase their self-awareness and expand their behavioral repertoires in empowering, authentic, and integrative ways, then they will be able, I believe, to “bring more of themselves” to work.”

So, what does all this have to do with inclusion? Those of us who write, speak about, and do research on inclusion in workgroups and organizations often use the shorthand phrase “bringing all of one's self to work” as a description of a key goal or facet of inclusion. As I talk to more people about this idea, and reflect on my own experiences, this seemingly simple notion becomes less straightforward and more complex. What does it really mean to be “fully oneself” in any given social situation, such as one's workgroup? A simplistic analysis of the phrase suggests that each of us has a core way of being, fixed preferences for how to behave and interact, and set approaches for engaging and communicating with others. Implied in the use of the phrase, perhaps, is the idea of an unchanging “me”

that is more or less at liberty to come out, depending on the context.

Yet, to the extent that this concept is left there, it becomes problematic and does not do justice to the goal of inclusion. First, we must recognize that not all possible “true” selves are appropriate for every situation; “anything goes” doesn’t work. Second, we often adapt to different situations, for example by wearing appropriate clothing, and do not necessarily feel fake or phony when we do so. I am as much myself wearing shorts and sneakers in my back yard as I am wearing a suit at a reception. Third, I believe all of us adapt, to some degree, to other people – whether at home, in our community, or at work.

A key issue in considering authenticity as a component of inclusion, then, is who has to adapt and how much. Is it (much) more comfortable for some people than for others? And this is often related to issues of social structure and privilege. Fitting in and feeling comfortable is much more of a stretch for some people than for others, and therefore they must use more thought, more energy, and more resources to fit in. In Buenos Aires and in San Diego, most of the people with whom I interacted didn’t need to think about how to be – they just went about their business in the “normal,” relatively automatic, way. Since I was transitioning between cultures, it was a little bit more effort for me. Over time, I’ve come to think of inclusion as not necessarily requiring that everyone be always fully comfortable – probably an impossible goal in any case. Instead, it may be more realistic and appropriate to think about inclusion as requiring that everyone be equally *uncomfortable*. (Of course, I don’t mean to say that discomfort should be created for its own sake, just that it should be equally spread around.)

But what did it mean, particularly in the context of my cultural transitions, to be “really me?” How do I know when a particular behavior, style, or way of interacting is really me and when it is not? This question became particularly apparent to me during my cultural transitions this summer. I was different in some noticeable ways in Buenos Aires than in San Diego. And both styles were really me! Indeed, as it turns out, there are many facets to “me,” and so I can behave in different ways, and even have varying preferences at different times, all the while being and feeling quite authentic.

Inclusion is not only about creating the conditions under which individuals can bring in individual (and culturally-based) characteristics and ways of being and

thinking. It can also mean creating spaces and ways of interacting that can support people in exploring more of their range of styles and options, to the extent that is their choice. To the extent that people increase their self-awareness and expand their behavioral repertoires in empowering, authentic, and integrative ways, then they will be able, I believe, to “bring more of themselves” to work. Inclusion also means facilitating cultural transitions so that the person who is different than the majority is not made to feel deviant or strange. Instead, recognizing the experience of transition can permit more choices and more options. “Bringing all of oneself to work” does not mean that we should be on automatic. On the contrary, it means recognizing that cultural transitions and cross-cultural interactions are much more frequent than we realize, and that we all make constant choices about when and how much to adapt.

Please email questions/comments/thoughts to the editor (jonathangale@cox.net) for the Letters column in subsequent newsletter issues.



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