

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Haskell Hooked on the Northern Cheyenne

GORDON WEAVER

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How many of us take seriously the unsolicited pleas for support that arrive with the daily mail? Has such an appeal ever changed your life? It is just such an unpromising beginning that eventually gets Haskell hooked on the Northern Cheyenne, transforming his humdrum life into a mission. American fiction writer Gordon Weaver (b. 1937) chronicles Haskell's journey in a series of letters, beginning with Haskell's first polite note to Father Cyprian, which accompanies his first perfunctory five-dollar donation to the Cheyenne Mission School in far-off Montana.

Though we are never privy to the letters that Father Cyprian writes to Haskell, we know that their sustained correspondence causes Haskell to take stock of who he is and how he is living, and awakens sympathies and a sense of responsibility he never knew he had. But the account that so convinces him fails to convince his wife, his boss, or his brother. In the end, should we praise Haskell for his newly found purpose or blame him for negligence? Has he become more alert to the world and connected to others, or less so? Do we have a model of charitable giving, or a "how-not-to" guide? What do you make of Haskell's final closing, "Your Friend in Christ"?

March 3rd

Fr. Cyprian Hogan, OFM
Cheyenne Mission School
Broadaxe, Montana

Dear Fr. Cyprian:

Enclosed please find my check for five dollars (\$5.00) in response to your appeal. My wife and I appreciate the gift of the little plastic teepee, and send our best wishes to you in your work among the northern Cheyenne. We're both sure the money will be put to good use, and only regret it is not more.

Yours Very Truly,
H. Haskell

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March 19th

Fr. Cyprian Hogan, OFM
Cheyenne Mission School
Broadaxe, Montana

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Dear Fr. Cyprian:

Enclosed find my check for \$5.00 in response to your second appeal in as many weeks. From the letter of thanks you sent after the first check I feel you've gotten off on an unfounded assumption. We're not fellow Catholics. It was the "Dear Friend in Christ" salutation in your letter—or does that just mean someone who appears to feel the same way about things like charity without belonging to the same club?

My wife attended bible camp for two summers while in junior high, so you could call us generic Protestants; anyway we're not Catholic. If we did attend a church regularly it would have to be one of the Lutheran varieties. Please don't misunderstand.

I like to call myself a liberal, and we both realize your mission helps the Cheyenne regardless of *their* religious affiliations—I remember your statement in the first appeal to the effect that only a small percentage of the tribe are practicing Catholics.

I only want the record straight. I give because I want to. Again, we send along our moral support. I know nothing about the problems you face, the daily lives of the Indians, but have some general ideas about poverty, bad nutrition, illiteracy, etc. prevailing on our federal reservations.

Yours Very Truly,
H. Haskell

P.S. You might like to know the little plastic teepee's in good hands. We have no children, but I gave it to a neighbor child, who was quite pleased. A miracle, her mother came over to thank me, and she's never done more before this than nod hello as she pulls out in her station wagon. I guess it's not the sort of toy one can buy in the stores here.

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April 17th

Fr. Cyprian Hogan, OFM
Cheyenne Mission School
Broadaxe, Montana

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Dear Fr. Cyprian:

What is with you, Father? No, that's wrong. I don't want to offend, vent spleen, etc. But you're imposing, and I've got to express it. My wife warned me not to write—"Just simply ignore it," she said. "Is there a law that says you have to answer all the junk mail you get?" But you owe me a hearing.

In two weeks' time we received two appeals from you for donations to your work among the northern Cheyenne. I sent you \$10.00. The canceled checks have already come back from my bank ("He didn't waste any time cashing in," my wife said when she was going over the monthly statement).

I hoped I conveyed good will, a recognition of your need, and I hoped—in vain I see now—you understood my position, that in good will you would not try to take advantage; now I get a third appeal for money. Let me be understood.

I am not wealthy. My salary is *exactly* \$6,400 per annum (all right, so I get a little more each June when we work evenings on inventory). If you're interested (I doubt this), I make my living as a technical writer.

I write: technical manuals to accompany industrial air conditioning and heat transference units, explaining operation and maintenance for the layman; the text of advertising brochures used by our sales engineers; short articles on business conditions (marketing prospects, government regulations, technical developments, credit prospects for the near future) for a monthly trade magazine published by my employer.

Ye Gods, if I was rich wouldn't my checks have been larger? Wouldn't I beat the income tax with huge gifts, trust funds to see Indian orphans through graduate school? Wouldn't I sign over the deeds to properties to you, endow a chair in some university to study your problems? You abuse me.

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Don't I give enough? My newsboy comes to the door in the evenings to demand a contribution for summer camps for kids like himself—I give, not much, but give. College dropouts come around with magazine subscriptions to get trips to Europe. Brownies come in uniform to sell their cookies; I eat them for lunch faithfully. A neighbor (who holds loud parties we are never invited to) comes with a clipboard and informs me everyone is pledging twenty dollars for the ambulance service. I mail a buck to both political parties to keep democracy strong.

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I'm not safe on the streets. Little Leaguers jump me on the way out of the bank with tin cans because they want an electric scoreboard. I get a Buddy Poppy for each wife and self. The Salvation Army surrounds me on the asphalt parking lot in the shopping center. At work, the United Fund sends me an IBM card via one of the girls in the steno pool. What is it with these people? I ask. "We've got to live here, don't we?" my wife says. I grin and give.

And now my name's on some religious sucker list. Because I've given you ten you think I'll give a hundred. I call halt. An unsolicited plastic teepee does not obligate me; I know the law. Catholics may be bound by oath or faith or mortal sin to support you. I am not.

How many of those printed formats do you have at the ready? Save it for someone else; I'm not a colored pin on a map, no target in your war to save the Red Man. I'm young, not thirty yet, owe on house and car, support a wife, heavily insured, need to hire a tree surgeon to save the one big elm on my property, suspect our furnace won't make another winter through. Give me a break.

Understand. "And then you go and write another check," my wife says in disgust, and now pretends to be watching television too intently to hear me when I speak. "I don't want him to misunderstand is all," I say. So, \$5 more, to convince you of good will, that I intend no hurt. Take it in the spirit it is given.

Sincerely,
H. Haskell

April 28th



www.whatsoproudlywehail.org

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Fr. Cyprian Hogan, OFM
Cheyenne Mission School
Broadaxe, Montana

Dear Fr. Cyprian:

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I have received your long letter. You say: the force that carries you out there is the same spirit of charity you appeal to in me. Will it work to let you forgive me too?

What can I say? How kneel, sackcloth and ashes, beat the breast, how *mea culpa* from a thousand miles away via air mail? The whole thing reeks of ignorance and selfishness—all mine. Haskell thinks he understands, complains that your appeals are mass-produced, steals your time by demanding a personal reply.

I showed the letter to my wife. “I wish you’d just drop the whole thing,” she said. “I should never have said those things, I didn’t understand the way I do now,” I said. No avail. “Just leave me out of it,” she asks. Forgive her, too.

When I started writing this she took the car and went over to my brother’s house to visit with his wife. Have you heard anything from my brother? I gave him your address and one of the pamphlets. “What am I supposed to do with this?” he said. “Send him something.” At least he folded it and put it in his pocket. “You ever heard about charity at home?” he said. Then we took turns cutting his lawn with his new electric mower.

I plead ignorance in the first place. What did I know about the northern Cheyenne, Father? The story of Thomas, the little boy abandoned in the wrecked car by his parents because they couldn’t feed him, that one did me in. Literally, real tears; fortunately I happened to be home alone then too. Sure I knew the Indians had it rough, but never the details. The TB, the drunkenness, infant mortality, what did I know? What I knew I only guessed. Thomas turning blue with the cold in that rusted junker, asking how far down in the milk bottle he could drink, here I was ignorant. Can you forgive me?

The same for the history pamphlets. I had ideas, broken treaties, destroying the buffalo herds, but that’s all from the movies. My brother read the one about Shivington’s massacre of the women and children in the village. “They had that on TV a while back, I think,” he said. “This is where it happened,” I said, “here, these people I’m telling you

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about.” “I know it happened,” he said. “When the program started it said it was based on an actual fact.” What does he know?

I tried getting angry, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Secretary of the Interior (I don’t even know his name), the President, affluent citizens of Montana. No good. It all came out shame in the end.

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Then comes selfishness. Watch out here for self-pity.

Sometimes there’s nothing to hold onto. I mean, wife, work, responsibilities, installment payments, become a little too much. I get afraid I can’t hold it together for long, pieces are going to fall out, and where are we all then? Tangled up, I can’t see out: it makes me selfish.

A few minutes ago (my wife still isn’t back—she must be staying for the late show. Out the picture window, the last visible porch light blinked off—no parties tonight)—a few minutes ago I promised myself not to talk about my problems. But to apologize I need to be understood.

Believe it, I work hard. If I’m a success, industrial air conditioners are sold, stock dividends are voted (I don’t own much yet), but where am I? I go to sleep at night promising to be ready to eat the world the next day, but it’s hard to concentrate with the township’s teenagers peeling the corner at the end of the block. I must dream. The resolve to be enthusiastic is sapped when the clock radio buzzes—”I suppose it won’t do to heat up last night’s coffee for you, it’s got to be fresh-made,” my wife says. How would you feel?

Do priests get up before the sun to pray? Is that me, the swollen face shaving in the bathroom mirror? The glazed eyes mine? My wife sings with the sizzling bacon in the breakfast nook, I stand dumb, looking at the sick elm in our yard. But I *do* get off to work. Do you understand me?

The days are longer now, still light when I come home, and I admit (why should I feel guilty?) to moments of peace after I greet my wife. We sit and watch the wars and speeches on film on the evening news, but who believes in that stuff? I drink a cold martini—okay, sometimes three—we talk about her day (“Did you see the moving van down towards the circle?” “Not when I came home, no. Who’s moving out?” “I don’t

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know their name, but there was a van there all day moving them out. It's the ones with the Imperial I told you about she's always driving by in." "So if you don't know their names who cares if they move?" "I didn't say I cared. I just told you.")

"Be a doll and mix one more," I say. "Two olives." All's well. I admit to moments of peace. Is it my fault they don't last? Page | 7

I work in a cubicle in a large office (air conditioned). From my desk I can look out through the glass panels at the busy secretaries in the steno pool, their ears plugged with dictaphones, eyes fixed on their proof sheets. I never know their names until one comes around to collect donations for a wedding gift for Marie or Ardenne or Patty. I believe most of them are secret gum chewers. Engineers and marketing analysts and file clerks pass up and down aisles, say, "Here you go," when they toss a sheaf of paper into my *In* basket. Am I making sense?

I do try though. Excelsior. This Saturday I have decided to dig a small garden next to my garage. I was talking to the neighbor girl (she still has the teepee); she likes flowers, so I'll plant some along with a few vegetables. Back to the land.

Too tired to read it over, I hope what I've written is clear. The check, you'll see, is for ten this time, all I can do for now. Please continue to let me hear of your good work at the mission.

With sincere regard,
H. Haskell

May 29th

Fr. Cyprian Hogan, OFM
Cheyenne Mission School
Broadaxe, Montana

Dear Fr. Cyprian:

I thought I would not hear from you again. Good to know I am not forgotten. Is the little Indian chief doll authentic? I mean, are the headdress, decorations on the jacket,

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etc., the kind the Cheyenne wear—wore once? We’ve put him on the mantel-piece above the fireplace. My wife thinks he’s cute. She calls him Sitting Bull, though I tell her he wasn’t a Cheyenne. Or was he?

Not cute though. I’ve been analyzing the expression on his face. At first I said: Stoic. But that’s all in the folded arms. Then: Courageous. But the brown painted eyes are too pale, no steel there. Sad? His back’s too stiff. Finally I knew. “He disapproves,” I said to my wife. “Who what?” “He condemns.” “What are you talking about, Haskell? Did I make that martootie too strong?” (She never uses my first name; nor do I—have you noticed? Hollis: my mother’s maiden name—my brother got Jack, because he’s the older.)

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Unless I can learn to stare him (Sitting Bull) down I’m going to give him away too. “I tell you he doesn’t like it,” I said to my wife. “All that Indian wisdom in him disapproves.” She said, “I think you’re getting hooked on the northern Cheyenne, Haskell.” Pure fantasy, Father, I assure you.

I wish this check could be more, but insurance all comes due at the same time: automobile, theft, fire, property, hospitalization, life.

Are there any extra pamphlets (describing the work) lying around in your office? I want to give some to friends and people at work.

Hoping to hear from you again soon.

H. Haskell

P.S. My garden progress. Besides flowers, I planted sweetcorn, tomatoes, lettuce, beans—a landmark in this neighborhood. The little girl next door has never seen a tomato growing on a vine before in her life. “My daughter tells me you’re planting regular vegetables and stuff here,” her father said to me. He had come out in his slippers. “I’m Haskell,” says I, hand extended. “I know who you are, I can read the writing on the mail box like anybody else, can’t I? What do you want to do a thing like that for, can you tell me that?” “I like fresh corn.” “You know this is gonna make my house look like hell too, don’t you?” I promise to try and keep it small. “What did you expect him to say?” my wife said. Who could tell? What a world we live in, Father.

P.P.S. Next stop: public library—subject: American Indians.

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June 16th

Dear Fr. Cyprian:

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Pardon poor penmanship. I should be working, but who are we trying to kid? The wooden trays on my desk runneth over—copy piles up awaiting my initials (HHH—my mother’s mother’s maiden name was Hart). Through the glass wall around me I can see the steno I’m keeping idle. She is at a loss, buffs her nails, cleans her teeth with her tongue, changes typewriter ribbons, stacks carbons in readiness, switches off to the ladies room, returns too soon, panics, looks to me with terrified eyes, and I shake my head, pontifical as Sitting Bull on my mantel, and she slumps into her chair, defeated. The trouble is I get to thinking.

In the cafeteria a salesman said to me, “What’s the use of working when the government takes a fifth of what I make before I even see it?” I swallowed my bread. “Do you know the Indians out in Montana makes less a year, on the average, than you probably pay in taxes in a year?” He threw down his sandwich before he blasted me. “Oh for Christ’s sakes (he said it, Father, not me) Haskell, will you get off the goddamned boring Indians in Montana!”

I gave up reading the library books. “Are we doing anything tonight?” my wife asked. “Doing? I’m doing, I’m reading, right?” “If you’re sticking your nose in a book all night, sure,” and she turned on the television extra loud to get even. “Do you know all about Indians now?” the librarian asked when I returned them. What do I know?

Last Saturday I was weeding and cultivating my sweetcorn. Pleasant, hot sun, hands sore and back stiff, but my neighbor was watching me from his garage, pretending to putter with his son’s go-kart. At last I waved and he came over. “Great day for outdoor work,” says I. “Can I ask you something in a nice way? Can I ask you something simple like one gentleman to another?” “Shoot.” “Will you get rid of this corn patch? Flowers I have nothing against, but you’ll agree I got twenty-four thousand dollars invested in a home, I’ve got a right to protect it.” “I’ll share the sweetcorn with you. Would you and your wife come to a corn roast? I’m thinking of building a barbecue, would you like to help?” He affirms that he has tried to reason with me, now warns he’ll go about it in a different manner since I only want trouble. Do I need trouble, Father Hogan?

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How is the work going on the dormitory? I looked around at my corn, the small green tomatoes, climbing beans, remembered the Indian children afraid to eat your school's hot lunch because they never have lunch at home, afraid to eat today because tomorrow they'll be hungry again. I checked out a book on bricklaying yesterday. My wife doesn't understand at all.

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My supervisor approaches, the steno at his side. He is grim, puzzled. She wrings her hands. Must close.

In haste,
Haskell

July 27th

Fr. Cyprian Hogan, OFM
Cheyenne Mission School
Broadaxe, Montana

Dear Fr. Cyprian:

Telephoned home this afternoon. "Any mail?" I asked my wife. Where are you calling from?" "Work, where else?" "I thought you weren't supposed to make personal calls." "What mail?" "There's one." "Are you trying to make me angry? One from where?" "Postmarked Montana." "Bring it down, I'll meet you in the parking lot." "I've got better things to do with my time." "Name one," I said, but she wouldn't, so I had to wait to get home this evening to write you.

I am honestly excited about the possibilities of the new industry as means of helping the Cheyenne. My professional opinion of the full-color brochure layouts on the jewelry you're making is no less than good. Good. If you want I'll show them to the art boys at work and pass their judgment along. How are the orders coming in?

After sound and fury, my wife agrees to telephone all her friends and drum up a big sale for you. "How?" she says. "Have a party, I'll get out of the house, the way they do for pots and pans." Tomorrow she promises to start.

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At first I pondered: Indian jewelry? But *what* doesn't matter, I see now. *Why* is all. You start with fifteen employed—how soon can you expand? You make mail order jewelry in order to remake men; I sell air conditioners. The check's only ten again, but I'll nag my wife to come up with an order for the beads that will more than make up for it.

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I appreciated the personal note. Was my letter "diffuse"? It was one of those days. That set my wife off again. Am I writing letters on the sly now? I write because I need to write, I feel like writing. Am I going into the charity business? I give because I want to give. She just doesn't understand, does she. All's well now though; I agreed to go visit my brother and his wife with her.

One failure: I tried to ship you some corn and beans I harvested this week (I knew tomatoes would never make it). "Can't take it," said the little man in the blue coat at the post office. "It'd spoil." I might have said: what good's a post office that can't ship food from one man to another? People are starving out there! But he looked tired, and his blue jacket was wrinkled. Will two wrongs make a right?

Your friend,
H. Haskell

P.S. Are summers in Montana such you could use an air conditioner in the school or the new dormitory when it's done? I might be able to start something at the office to get them to contribute one. Isn't it deductible?

August 14th

Dear Father:

No letterhead stationery this time. I'm not at work, but that's all arranged. I couldn't do what I was supposed to do. The steno did her best, didn't sic the supervisor on me for some time. "Mr. Haskell," she said, "if you don't give me that stuff then I've got nothing to do and Miss Lubin will be after me for sitting around." No small thing, Miss Lubin is huge and acne-scarred. What could I do. "Maybe later," says I. "Not now." She had to bring my supervisor. His name is Knauer; all my copy has to go through him. "What is it you think you're doing, Haskell?" "I told him I hadda have that stuff or Miss Lubin gets

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after me, Mr. Knauer,” the steno said. I think she was beginning to enjoy it. “I’ll do this,” Knauer said. The typewriters slowed down on the other side of the glass; there hadn’t been any excitement in the office since personnel hired a mousy girl name Peplinski (her name I knew!) months ago—she was a secret epileptic and threw a fit at her desk, chewed right through some bond paper one afternoon. “I can’t do anything,” I said.

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“Are you ill, Haskell? Are you trying to pull something off on me?” “The Indians need me, Knauer,” and I might have gotten snotty with him, but remembered that everyone calls him Weasel Knauer behind his back because of his narrow pointed face, so took pity and kept silence. “He’s been talking funny about those Indians,” he whispered to the steno, and they backed out afraid. He came back with a janitor to protect him in case I raged. “You can feel free to go home if something’s wrong, Haskell,” he said. The janitor carried a long-handled broom to subdue me. Am I the violent type? “Just till you feel better. Don’t worry about a thing,” he said, “I’ll contact personnel for you.”

“I’m worried about the Indians, Weasel Knauer,” I said, but he kept on backing out to make sure the janitor was between us until I left the office. The girls in the steno pool tried not to stare.

My wife won’t know about this letter either because she hasn’t been here for three days. It could be she calls, or it could be personnel wanting to know if I’m terminating, but I don’t answer the phone. I came home like they told me at the office, and I could talk to her, but she didn’t quite understand.

“I’m telling you why if you’ll listen to me. It was the Indians. I couldn’t do what I’m supposed to do there,” I said. Said she: “I don’t know what’s the matter with you, you talk about the Indians all the time. You never say anything except about the Indians all the time. Stay over there. Don’t touch me. I don’t understand you anymore. I don’t want to talk about the Indians anymore.” What was there left to say? But I kept on talking, and finally she cried, and she cried, so I stopped for good. So she left. I think she’s with my brother and his wife. Her parents live far from here. The phone rings often, and there was someone at the door yesterday and today. I thought I recognized the broken muffler on my brother’s Oldsmobile.

Why don’t you write? Are you still waiting for that jewelry order I promised? Give up, Father. Nobody wants Indian-style jewelry, not my wife, not anybody. She broke her promise about holding that party to sell it. “I’d be ashamed to show cheap jewelry like

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that to my friends.” I tried to tell her how it was to help the Cheyenne, but who understands? I think they have all the jewelry they need.

I’ve thought better of it too, Father. Sending out plastic teepees and Indian dolls, cheap jewelry, that’s not the way, not for me anyhow. I gave Sitting Bull to the neighbor girl, but her mother brought it back. “Keep your trashy presents to yourself!” she screamed when I opened the door. I was afraid she’d have an attack of some kind. When her husband came home that night he stood in his yard and glared at my cornfield with his hands on his hips. My tomatoes are rotting on the vines. I started with a bushel basket full at the other end of the block to give them away, but when the woman (maybe it was a maid?) peeked through her curtains to see who it was she waved me off. The word must be out on Haskell.

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No, the way is things like the mission school, and the free hot lunches for children who don’t get them at home, and finding Thomas abandoned in the autowreck. That’s the way. Build that dormitory and staff the school with teachers so you can have classes more than half a day. What kind of a world is this?

The doorbell’s ringing. Maybe you’ve written, but I haven’t gone out to see the mail. There won’t be any money in this letter because my wife took the checkbook with her. I might as well answer the door, I’ve got to go out and mail this (if I can find a stamp). Money’s not the way anyhow.

September 5th

Dear Father:

Here’s Proof I no longer ignore the mail, though now all my letters are delayed a day or two because of my change of address. I’ve been with my brother and his family for the past few days. My wife is now with her parents, and while I’m grateful to my brother for taking me in, I will be glad to leave (he is glad our mother didn’t live to see this, etc.). My sister-in-law won’t stay alone in the same room with me, and their children are with her parents until I go. Can I blame them? Accept, I say to myself, they don’t want to understand.

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From your letter, Father Hogan, I'd almost think you didn't understand either. I'm satisfied to think that's just a problem caused by my "diffuse" expression. I comment briefly; there's much to do before I can be on my way.

Agreed, the world's as it is because we're like we are. Now concede we can change it by changing ourselves. Proof? Look in the mirror. I'm argument enough for me. Page | 14

Friends, clergyman, psychiatrists? Come on now! Do I need friends with a brother like mine? I went to church last Sunday—my brother's high Episcopal these days—it's the closest one. "Excuse me, Reverend," I said (my brother says he's called Father, like you). "Would you read this little prayer and appeal for the northern Cheyenne at the end of your sermon for me today? I've got my telephone number right there if anyone wants to call in a pledge." I still have the mark on my arm where my brother grabbed me when he pulled me away to a pew. "Can't I even let you out of the house?" he said. You're the only clergy I know, and I've been consulting, not your letters, but your example. I don't see doctors because I don't have any money (that's all my wife's: house, car, our small savings)—what do I need money for? I know the language of psychiatrists. They don't want to change the world.

Here I am then. We can talk all this over in detail later if you want. I wish I could say exactly when, but there are papers to be signed, arrangements—I hope for the best. Who knows, with luck I might arrive at the mission shortly after this letter.

You'll see, I'll be of use. I'll mix cement, lay bricks, teach school. I'll scour the mountains for abandoned children. I can learn. I haven't told you before this because I feared you wouldn't understand. But you'll see. It may take longer than I think. I have so little money I may have to hitchhike all the way to Montana. What does time matter when you've found your way at last, Father?

My brother shouts from downstairs that dinner is ready. The flesh must be fed. I'll close:

H. Haskell, Your Friend in Christ.