

## Peace-talk

In March, 2003, I was to go to America to give a lecture on the Perennial Philosophy. But then the war in Iraq came and I decided not to go. I wish I could have been clearer in my own mind about it all but I found myself torn by contending feelings. On the one hand I wanted to make the visit and to give my lecture. On the other hand, I felt that the distraction of the war made it difficult for people to do more than watch its terrible unfolding day by day on the screens of their televisions.

As it happens, ever since the first of the peace marches, I had felt a strange emptiness, a sense that something was missing. Of course, I knew that such public action was important, and I admire those who decide to protest in this way. But somehow I was then, and I have been since, overcome by a feeling that it will never be enough. For it seems to me that those of us for whom war is simply not an option have a special responsibility not simply to protest but to say what it is that we will do in the face of tyranny and oppression, wherever it is found.

The war came. And then the war went away – or at least the bit that we normally call ‘war’. And now we are left with the bit that we normally call ‘peace’ – except that guns continue to be fired and people continue to die. When does war start and when does it end and when does it begin again? More especially, when are we at war and when are we at peace?

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Besieged by all of this and, indeed, by the incessant ‘noise of war’, I found myself returning for sustenance to the wellspring of my Quaker tradition and not least to the first of our *Advices & Queries*:

Take heed, dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth  
in your hearts...<sup>1</sup>

At the centre of this advice there is, of course, not only a strong commitment against war but also a strong commitment to non-violence and peace.<sup>2</sup> But when I looked, I found that we are asked to go further than this. For we are urged not only to stand in opposition to war but to live “in the virtue of that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars<sup>3</sup> (my emphasis). This requires not simply that we be against war ‘out there’ but that we do not harbour within our hearts the seeds of war.

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<sup>1</sup> *Advice & Queries* 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Quaker Faith & Practice*, Chapter 24.

<sup>3</sup> George Fox, 1691. *Ibid*, 24.01.

And, furthermore, it requires that we hold true to that most difficult of Christ's teachings, that we love our enemies. Our *Advices and Queries* ask us:

... Do you faithfully maintain our testimony that war and the preparation for war are inconsistent with the spirit of Christ? Search out whatever in your own way of life may contain the seeds of war. Stand firm in our testimony, even when others commit or prepare to commit acts of violence, yet always remember that they too are the children of God.<sup>4</sup>

And it is worth noting that this advice is followed immediately by one that underlines our personal responsibility:

Bring into God's light those emotions, attitudes and prejudices in yourself which lie at the root of destructive conflict, acknowledging your need for forgiveness and grace. ...<sup>5</sup>

This is difficult enough but, as I have said, it seems to me that the real challenge for us is this: that since we protest against war we have an awesome responsibility to be clear about what it is that we propose as an alternative.

However, we immediately run into an impasse. For those who challenge convention do not set the ground for debate. The ground is set by those who accept convention and will only argue within its bounds. 'Another solution' simply cannot, therefore, be found unless that ground is abandoned, those bounds broken.

For example, presented with tyranny and suffering, the conventional language of war focuses upon the former, most often identifying the enemy in a highly personalized way. But perhaps there is another way of looking at such a problem. We could say that in Iraq the focus on Saddam Hussein was the wrong focus. We could say that although they are connected the real problem in Iraq was not tyranny, that is Saddam Hussein, but suffering, that is the poverty, illness and homelessness of the Iraqi people. At great cost, convention brought arms and men to bear down upon the tyrant, with aid as an aftermath. But why is it not possible for nations to come together, much more than they do at present, to greatly increase the effort being made directly to tackle the suffering 'a priori'? Irrespective of the controlling regime, can we imagine a United

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<sup>4</sup> *Advice & Queries* 31.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

Nations workforce having the collective authority to move into countries that suffer in this way and provide food, shelter and medicines, wherever possible providing the local people with the means to help themselves – and maintaining that support for as long as is needed? And if not, are we not letting the limits of convention stifle us?

Of course, much good work is already underway, but what I am calling for is such a shift in awareness that the present efforts would be increased not less than ten-fold. And who would pay? We would pay. For the truth is that our present lifestyles are already enjoyed at the cost of those that suffer. It is not our wealth alone; it is theirs also. And we should share it with them. Would we feast with a starving child at the door? Well at present we do so all of the time, the only difference being that, for those of us in the West, the child is usually many miles away. Furthermore, the truth is that there really is no solution that does not carry a cost. After all, we paid for the war in Iraq and no doubt we shall be expected to pay for the continuing ‘war against terrorism’.

In all of this, I hear that haunting teaching of Christ:

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink:

I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked and ye clothed me not: sick and in prison, and ye visited me not.

Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.<sup>6</sup>

So, there can be no excuses. We are charged with removing “the occasion of all wars”<sup>7</sup> and I think that the following extract from *Quaker Faith & Practice*, written in 1915, proclaims the matter clearly (the emphasis is mine):

Meeting at a time when the nations of Europe are engaged in a war of unparalleled magnitude, we have been led to recall the basis of the peace testimony of our religious Society. It

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 25.42-45

<sup>7</sup> Op cit, George Fox.

is not enough to be satisfied with a barren negative witness  
We must search for a positive, vital, constructive message.<sup>8</sup>

The text goes on to propose that the solution is to be found in Christ's message of love and the 'indwelling Christ', which calls to "the peaceable spirit and the rule of love in all the broad and manifold relations of life".

And, using the words of George Fox quoted above, the text ends as follows:

Thus while love, joy, peace, gentleness and holiness are the teaching of the life and death of our Lord, it is to these that we are also impelled by the indwelling of the Divine in men. As this spirit grows within us, we shall realise increasingly what it is to live in the virtue of that life and power which takes away the occasion of all wars.

By emphasizing this aspect of the problem, we are in effect recognizing that the 'root of destructive conflict'<sup>9</sup> lies within us and in the values that inform our day-to-day life. We have to ask ourselves, therefore, whether or not the seeds of violence lie hidden within the ground of our personal relationships, our work, the form of our governance and economy. Unless and until we do so, we are unlikely to be able to find and sustain that way that "takes away the occasion of all wars".

I know that there is already a body of work that has explored this territory and I am embarrassed at my own ignorance of the work to which good people devote their lives. But I feel that it will never be enough to proclaim institutional solutions unless and until we have accepted the need to look deep within ourselves. At a recent Quaker meeting, an elderly Friend quoted from the Anglican prayer book "O God, make clean our hearts within us. And take not thy Holy Spirit from us". There is much wisdom in this and I feel that we shall never be able to overcome the violence in the big and distant things until we are able to overcome the violence in the small things that are close at hand.

It matters how we see the world. For, as the Buddha taught us:

What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday,  
and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life  
is the creation of our mind.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Op cit, *Quaker Faith & Practice*, 24.08.

<sup>9</sup> Referred to in Advice 31 above.

<sup>10</sup> *The Dhammapada*, v.1.

So if there is violence, conflict and aggression we should show no surprise, since we have come to believe in violence, conflict and aggression. Indeed, we have been persuaded that violence, conflict and aggression are not only inherent in us but define us. So long as this ignorance rules our lives, so long shall we continue to live in conditions of violence, conflict and aggression, for, as we have seen, what we take to be true becomes manifest both within us and around us.

If, then, it all depends upon what we take to be true and what we choose to take an interest in, I have come to realise that I am not interested in war. For war is not true in the sense that peace is true. And so I have taken a vow not to discuss it. I am no longer interested in protesting about something that I am *against* but only in proposing that which I am *for*. And I am *for* peace and I am for it for a number of good reasons.

Firstly, I am for peace because I believe that this is our natural state. I believe that at root we have a tendency to seek to be at peace both within ourselves and with those around us. It seems to me that our families and our work are based upon endless acts of co-operation and collaboration, and that over millions of years those that have survived have done so by learning to fit into their habitat whether this be physical, social, economic or cultural – that however much we may seek to do things well, we also want to belong and to be a part of. And it also seems to me that it is precisely when we move away from this, or, indeed, when this harmony is disrupted, that we are most often endangered and distressed.

Secondly, it seems to me that reality is not made up of separateness but of relatedness, itself a manifestation of a mysterious balance and order. Albeit ever in flux, this natural state of one-ness is something to which we always seek to return, not to capture but to dwell within. For we are taught:

When this is, that is.  
This arising, that arises.  
When this is not, that is not.  
This ceasing, that ceases.<sup>11</sup>

Thirdly, I am struck by the common and timeless teachings of peace, gentleness, compassion and the caring for others. Whether it be the ten perfections of Buddhism, Rumi's songs of the beloved or Christ's parable of the Good Samaritan, there can be little doubt that the great teachings tell us that to be skilful, alive or full of grace is to be full of love – at

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<sup>11</sup> Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Grove Press, p. 53. AN X.92.

peace with ourselves and with others, at peace with nature and at peace with that great mystery that some call God.

The real challenge, then, is to make a robust and persuasive case for peace, to do what we can to learn the skills of peacefulness, to practise it and to be aware of the presence of peace and compassion in us and around us. Surely that is enough for one lifetime. For it is taught:

Better than a thousand useless words is one single word that gives peace.<sup>12</sup>

David Cadman, 2004

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<sup>12</sup> *The Dhammapada*, v.100.