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*'Here we glimpse
the Quaker charism.'*

Two articles in *The Friend*
On 'unmediable violence' and Quaker charism beyond war
by Alastair McIntosh, November 2023



Conversation peace: *Alastair McIntosh* on Quaker reconciliation work in conflict zones

‘Here we glimpse the Quaker charism.’

Something has always stuck in my mind from the late 1980s, when I served on what was then our Quaker Peace & Service committee, under the secretarial care of Ram Ramamurthy. A concern was raised, informally I think, about how we could pass on our experience of working for reconciliation in conflict zones. The generation that had lived through one or both world wars was starting to move on. How could their expertise be handed down to the next?

One figure whose Quaker mediation is credited with helping to avert likely genocide at the end of the Biafran war was Adam Curle. He chronicled his experience in *Tools for Transformation*, with chapter titles such as ‘The Atmosphere of Violence’, ‘Speaking the Truth’, and, uncomfortably, ‘Unmediable Violence’.

One chapter tells how he was taken to a Biafran marketplace. There, 128 women, ‘mostly with babies on their backs, had been cut to pieces by the sort of bomb which explodes into slivers of metal a few feet above ground’. Back in Lagos, Curle confronted Yakubu Gowon, the Nigerian general and head of state. Gowon was shocked and saddened, but answered grimly: ‘They will realise that rebellion doesn’t pay.’

Curle suggested that the bombing might have had the opposite effect. The Biafrans would say, ‘If the Nigerians are killing women and babies... then the things we have heard about genocide must be true.’

Gowan nodded sombrely. To his relief, Curle was able to conclude: ‘We were still friends.’

Gowan later said that the mediators’ success in de-escalating the impending violence was rooted in ‘a belief in God and humanity’. Similarly, his Biafran opponent, Odumegwu Ojukwu, put it down to their

‘absolute dedication to humanity... an infinite capacity for neutrality.’

I do not know how much such Quaker work endures today. The bulk of it was always behind closed doors. But recently, linked to one of my books, I was invited to a Zoom meeting on ‘a need to know only’ basis, hosted by a small Quaker Meeting in a region of intense current conflict.

There were about thirty participants face-to-face in a safe and supportive setting, and a further dozen of us online. About two-thirds were Quakers. We listened to and discussed the experience of mediators and refugee workers from at least seven countries. I was moved by the depth of sorrow etched into their beautiful faces.

We heard about refugee facilities being set up in nearby countries. These provide care for children, education, spaces of conviviality for community, and psychological support. One woman described her work, right inside the danger zone, as being with ‘traumatised people working with traumatised children’.

We heard that there are ‘narrow passageways between war and peace’, and that our calling is to seek these out. Here are people who have been touched by the abysmal, who have walked through the psalmist’s ‘valley of the shadow of death’, and yet were hanging on, and hanging in. They were living out that ‘active love’ that the Catholic activist Dorothy Day spoke of as ‘the works of mercy’.

An English Friend who had helped to organise the event wrote to me afterwards: ‘My sense of the contributions from all the speakers was that in any way available to them they were preparing the ground for future peace and reconciliation. In this sense, I have a keen perception of the value of working with traumatised children, as their unprocessed terror and rage can be the seeds of future aggression and brutality.’



Photo by Nowshad Arefin on Unsplash

Several of the speakers run Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) workshops alongside their other work. Here we glimpse the Quaker charism: not just interceding when wars start, or providing relief when they end but, with George Fox, trying to live continuously ‘in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars.’

One speaker was a veteran of a gruelling civil war. He is Roman Catholic but later told me, by email, that he considers himself a Quaker ally and attender. He also works closely with the Mennonites. Adam Curle had influenced him thirty years ago. Today, he works mostly

**‘I was moved
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with the leaders of veterans’ organisations, and with the mothers and widows of fallen soldiers.

It is among these, he testified, that he most truly finds ‘the sincere urge to

learn’, because ‘the people who have suffered most are often the ones with the most to give.’

These days, he continued, there is a need always to talk about projects. ‘But actually, peacebuilding is not about projects ... it is about presence as sharing life together’. Often, when we cannot directly pull the big levers of power, ‘the small steps are the biggest steps’. Peace work therefore means ‘solidarity, sharing experiences and empowerment, but not lecturing’.

I thought back to Adam Curle and the impact that his presence – his comportment, his bearing – had on me when I met him as a student, around 1976. Paradoxically, I have found his understanding of ‘unmediable violence’ very helpful. It is a reminder that we might participate in the work of God, but we should not make the error of thinking that we must achieve things beyond our human limitations. None of us completely shares a God’s-eye-

view of the greater cosmic picture.

In the 1970s, Sheila Cassidy, the medic and writer, was tortured by the Pinochet regime. In subsequent books, like *Good Friday People*, she suggests that sometimes there is nothing more that we can do than to bear witness. Such is the spirituality of the foot of the cross. As a hermit nun who prays constantly for the victims of torture told me: it means ‘holding them in God’.

But what good is that? It means facing times of seemingly-unmediable violence by not giving up, but by holding in and holding with. Like the five wise virgins who kept their lamps trimmed throughout the darkening of the night, it counsels a pregnant waiting that is critically poised – prepared for when the time might bring an opening of the way.

And so, to Russia and Ukraine today, to Israel and Palestine, and to all those half-forgotten sordid little wars that cry for mercy. Let us never forget the laudation that was delivered, in 1947, when the Quakers became the only religious organisation ever to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. It testified that in refugee and wartime relief work, the Quakers ‘believed that spiritual weapons would prevail in the long run – a belief born of inward experience’.

Lest we ourselves forget: the Quakers ‘have given us something more: they have shown us the strength to be derived from faith in the victory of the spirit over force.’ On behalf of the Nobel Committee, Gunnar Jahn closed his speech by quoting the Norwegian poet, Arnulf Överland:

*The unarmed only
can draw on sources eternal.
The spirit alone gives victory. ●*

Alastair is from Glasgow Meeting.

Leap in the dark: *Alastair McIntosh* looks for inner life

*‘Let not the occasion go
to waste.’*



Photo by Kyle Johnson on Unsplash

We now know that at least seven people have died across the UK from Storm Babet; and in the Middle East, as if Ukraine and wars in Africa were not enough, another

kind of storm has engulfed humanity.

Meanwhile, almost as if it is a metaphor for the way times are going, the clocks are going back, bringing a sense of evening darkness closing in.

It could all be doom and gloom: but not so fast!

In Scotland in the past, the bardic schools of poetry were held in darkest winter when the inner life comes most alive: for ‘poetry is not a luxury’ said

“Poetry is not a luxury” said the African American writer Audre Lorde, explaining that poetry represents the light, and that ‘the quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives’, directly affects ‘the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives.’

the African American writer Audre Lorde, explaining that poetry represents the light, and that ‘the quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives’, directly affects ‘the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives.’

Her words came back to me on Monday night. My wife, Vèrene, is French, and she was on a call to her brother in Paris.

He surprised her, saying that the state of things just now had made it dawn on him just what it is we’ve lost. We’ve lost the reverence for life, and the ability to find its beauty in nature and community. In a word, he said, we’ve lost the spirituality that makes everything join up.

I found myself thinking of a song called ‘Melancholy Man’, in a chart-topping Moody Blues LP from 1970, and the words:

*When all the stars are falling down
Into the sea and on the ground
And angry voices carry on the wind...*

It’s at this very point, goes the song, that:

*A beam of light will fill your head
And you’ll remember what’s been said
By all the good men this world’s ever known*

Good men, good women ... and so back round to Audre Lorde’s reminder, of ‘the quality of the light’. A darkness might be on the world, but let not the occasion go to waste. For as John’s gospel has it: that beam of light, is the life of humankind, ‘and the darkness did not overcome it’. ●

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I have included here the Contents of the article on Quaker war mediation, because while publishing the PDF, I noticed that the editorial staff of The Friend have added a most helpful quotation at the foot of this page that "speaks to my condition".

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'I do not know whether Quakers have special aptitudes or skills as mediators, but they tend to sympathise with both sides in an international dispute, as both are usually victims of past mistakes. Because Quakers believe that there is that of God in all people to which others may respond, they not only hope for the best but they expect the best, believing that bad situations are likely to get better with the input of a little honest goodwill. And because they consider that force nearly always creates more problems than it solves, Quakers feel impelled to do what is possible by reason and persuasion to resolve conflicts involving or threatening armed force.'

Sydney Bailey, 1984

Quaker faith & practice, 24.36