

POWER OF LOVE

ETHICS : ALASTAIR MCINTOSH

OVER THE PAST five years I've had the unusual experience, for a Quaker pacifist, of being asked to address annually 400 senior military officers at the Joint Services Command and Staff College, Britain's foremost school of war. Typically I arrive at Shrivenham the night before and dine with army brigadiers, wing commanders and naval commodores. The next morning I share a platform, and twice now it's been with Lord Deedes, the retired Editor of the *Daily Telegraph*.

He warms things up nicely as he tells the brass, assembled from sixty different countries, about the virtues of fox hunting! "You see, it gives a young man an eye for country," he says, "and if you're going to run a tank through a battlefield, you need to develop a good eye for country."

My job is to follow that! "Ladies and Gentlemen," I begin diffidently. "I am the sort of person you're more likely to meet on the other side of one of your fences at Faslane — or, if you are very unlucky, perhaps through a hole in one of your fences!" The place erupts with laughter and a buzz comes into the air. You can palpably feel the metaphorical "tally ho!" as a mass of uniformed riders surge forwards after their darting pacifist quarry.

Officially my brief is to speak about 'the influence of non-governmental organisations on government'. I'm here to share case studies of campaigning, such as Scottish land reform and the anti-corporate battle that stopped the Harris super-quarry. But really, I've come to talk about what's deep behind the lines on that long front that is about peacemaking in a world of fractured social and ecological justice.

"You're here to make us think," says the Course Director. "We're all here because we want peace. Our men and women seek peace just as deeply as you do. The challenge is how you achieve it." Well, just as the

What can nonviolence say to violence?

Countryside Alliance maintains that the fox only survives because the farmer gives it cover, so many of the military think that pacifism only thrives under the protection of their nuclear umbrella.

Yet time and time again I get told, "We *need* people like you to remind us of the limits." And that's what makes this exchange so interesting. You wouldn't think the military would care much about what peace campaigners think, but many do. Their implicit objective is to emerge from the chase reassured that, even if they are 'sinners', they are 'justified' ones.

MY OBJECTIVE IS to show that non-violence is a force for change that engages effectively with power but has nothing in common with cowardice. I reciprocally let them challenge my comfort zones, conceding that, yes, it is just possible that we are all occupying different posts on a long front that's about peace. It's just possible that without their nuclear umbrella, the freedom to challenge their ethics would never even have arisen.

Who knows, maybe in the deep and mysterious working of things, the world needs both: the fighters and those who are totally committed to nonviolence. Maybe there's a more complex interplay between war and peace than meets the eye. When on occasion a soldier comes up afterwards and asks if I think he or she should leave the forces, I recount what George Fox told fellow Quaker William Penn. Penn was vexed as to whether he should continue wearing a sword. Fox counselled, "Wear it as long as thou canst."

"When we first joined the services it was simple," many an officer has told me. "The Russians were over there, we were over here, and it was

our job to keep it that way. Nowadays it's often less clear what we might be fighting for. That is why we're open to people like you."

One cannot fail to be touched and impressed. These are people of dignity and integrity. Yes, in the heat of war, decent people can do terrible things. But the thrill of 'having a go' is not, quite emphatically, not, why ninety per cent of them are here.

As rapport builds and my presentation draws to a close, the missiles start raining in. It's a kind of friendly fire, but the metaphorical fox has to twist and turn on his wits' edge.

"So, what would you do about weapons inspections?" asks a senior military policeman.

"Set them to work first at Faslane — our own nuclear submarine base."

"And Saddam?" demands an army major.

"A 'monster', of our own making," I suggest, adding, "But where were you when the West armed him and he gassed his own people? What were you doing when people like me were writing our Amnesty International letters to Number 10 and getting fobbed off?"

"And what would you do if somebody attacked your home?" inquires a Kuwaiti naval officer.

"I've been there," I'm able to say. "They cleaned the house out while holding a knife to a friend sleeping downstairs with our children. If we'd kept a revolver, as did many expatriates, she'd likely have got her throat slit."

"What about rape?" asks a pilot.

And so I tell a real-life non-violence story. It was 1995, and I was living in a beautiful but violent third-world country. I was close to the family of an Australian history professor at the university — fellow Quakers. One night his seventeen-year-old daughter found her car surrounded. Fourteen young men from the nearby squatter settlement abducted and gang-raped her.

Normally the police would have



ILLUSTRATION: CLIFFORD HARPER

sorted it out in eye-for-eye fashion. They'd have trashed the squatter camp and beaten folks up. Not so on this occasion. The daughter trenchantly asked her father to find a way that might "touch their hearts". Rape can only happen in the absence of empathy. The capacity to feel has to be restored if the cycle of abuse is to be broken.

The family asked the chief of police that there be no retaliation. The father and I then walked into the squatter settlement and requested a meeting with its leaders. They said they were really sorry about what had happened. It was hard to control their young men who had become embittered by poverty and hopelessness. They were relieved not to have been roughed up.

We said that the girl wanted softening and not a hardening of hearts. She wanted whatever, in their culture, would be an appropriate ceremony of confession and reconciliation.

So it was that we subsequently

stood at the university gates as the entire squatter community turned out to apologise amidst much bearing of token gifts and beating of drums. Fourteen young men headed the procession. Many had tears in their eyes. They had not expected such humanity.

You just knew that, whilst the re-offending rate might not be zero, it would be very much less than had they been treated in kind. Hearts had indeed been touched. It also suggests a very important contrast between violence and nonviolence. They operate on different timescales. The logic of violence only makes any sense in the short run. Nonviolence, however, is a long-term and big-picture approach.

Some of the military just shrug off this sort of story. "I admire your courage," they'll say, "but very frankly, I think you're mad. Maybe in Heaven, but it's just not a realistic way to face the world."

Others see that nonviolence is actually a different way of engaging

with power. It's about the love of power yielding to the power of love. It's ultimately about preferring to die than to kill. It's about saying, yes, you have a right proportionately to retaliate in self-defence, but also, you have the option of renouncing that right. We're talking here about a power that may be greater than coercive force or the psychology of fear. We're talking about the psychology of conviction. We're talking, even, about the spirituality of transformation.

In my experience, and I've now addressed in total some 2,000 senior officers, the military can and do respect this. They can't relate to cowards, but they do have time for those who, like any true warrior, will look death in the jaws. They too know that any fool can live in conflict but it takes guts to live in peace.

I conclude by emphasising that the similarity between us is a willingness to die for our beliefs. The difference, however, is whether we will also kill for them.

IN MY LINE of work as a writer and activist for social and environmental justice, I've several times faced people who have threatened to kill me. It has been my experience that if you seriously renounce the option of violence and don't even prepare for it, then a whole new range of tactics can come into play.

The truth is that there's nothing more disconcerting when trying to pick a fight than being told, "Well, you can hit me if you must, but I won't strike you back." It kind of puts the rationale of violence on to a wobbly. Violence, it is true, only understands violence, and it gets confused and has to think twice when faced with the opposite.

I remember once, sitting in Iona Abbey at the Tuesday-night healing service. Mindful of all the spiritual abuse that's gone on in the name of religion, and dubious of the hocus pocus that can surround 'healing', I sat diffidently at the back. Nearby were two men, big guys: one, a white Glaswegian; the other, a black American.

During the first hymn, the Glaswegian started singing loudly and erratically. When silence fell, he took the opportunity to hurl obscenities, including some pretty spot-on abuse about the hypocrisy of the institutional church. His embarrassed American friend drew him outside. I followed them, conscious that the disturbed guy had maybe come to the healing service because of mental illness. I went up and said, "Look, if you've come for healing, go back in. There's people in there who'd help you."

"And who the fuck do you think you are?" he said, spitting the words in anger and agitation as he measured me up. Within minutes, he was challenging me to fight, shadow boxing within a shave of my face to try and provoke an instinctual response. He threatened to kill me and it really felt like he meant it: he seemed crazy and strong enough to succeed.

I managed to stand my ground. I told him he could strike if he wished, but I was not going to reciprocate. I'd been bloodied like this before and could be again. At this point, something very strange happened in my consciousness. I was pretty scared and increasingly out of my depth. But suddenly, it was as if a wonderful force-field had swept

down quite literally from the stars. It was like some great scooping hand, and it was holding me now in a state of perfect transcendental calm.

I had an utter conviction that "all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well," no matter whether he attacked me or not. Had I been struck, I do not think I would have felt the blow in a normal way: at least, not right then. The answer that nonviolence offers to violence is not retaliation in kind, but the taking-on of suffering. However, as evidence from contexts like South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission suggests, that suffering may, sometimes, carry a transcendental reconciling property.

Later on, my would-be assailant ended up munching toast with Helen Steven, the Iona Community's Justice and Peace Worker, and playing Bach far into the night on the Abbey piano. The next day he told her he had "never known such love", and had decided to join the Church.

"And do you know who that was, Alastair?" Helen asked me. "It was R.D. Laing, the great but crazy psychotherapist!" Sure enough, an obituary in *The Guardian* of 8th January 1990 reported, "There is disagreement over Laing's religious beliefs, and a clergyman at his funeral claimed that he joined the Church in his last four years, which rather surprised his relatives."

I'M CERTAINLY NOT suggesting that joining the institutional Church is the necessary objective of non-violence! Neither am I suggesting that my role that night was more than a small part in a larger process, in which others like Helen played a much more conclusive role. What I do suggest, however, is that non-violence can open the doors to experience and powers not normally of this world. There is a path here that we discard at our peril.

I should add, too, that in retrospect, I had probably been in no real danger. It was just a real-life psychodrama such as Ronnie Laing, of *The Divided Self* and *Knots* fame, was adept at creating. Given his phenomenal psychological knowledge, he probably did a pretty good job at making it more scary than the real thing! Whatever, the experience certainly felt like a testing and it left me with something precious.

It showed, and it has not for me been a unique event in this respect, that Mahatma Gandhi was right when he said that nonviolence is an active and not a passive force. Gandhi said that *satyāgraha*, as he called it, or 'truth force', is nothing less than the sword of divine love. Nonviolence, then, is about seeing ourselves in true relation to the whole, to the rest of life with which we are interconnected. If violence is the absence of love, nonviolence is about the presence of relationship. It is the means of connection with that which gives life.

That is why it's hard to explain in prosaic language why nonviolence matters and from where it derives its power. It's why many of those who argue for peace have difficulty in completing their arguments. The argument starts in this world, but doesn't end there. The suffering that we voluntarily take on is a birth pang, and you have to trust to life beyond life to get to full delivery. You have to remember that the greater part of our being can never be killed, and that God is always on the side of the suffering.

Like Jesus on his cross; like Gandhi, wounded by a bullet, many will lose their physical lives through nonviolence. In this the risks are the same as using violence. But equally, there's mounting evidence that non-violence can be effective. Consider India's independence struggle, the Philippines' revolution, the liberation of several former Eastern-bloc countries, and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. All these demonstrate nonviolence as a credible force in the face of tyranny.

Finally, back to the fox hunt. How ought we to have dealt with Iraq? We should have refused to appease death, and insisted only on actions that gave life. Saddam would have gone the same way as other once-implacable dictators like Marcos and Ceausescu. Yes, it would have meant massive suffering. But it would have been avoided, as John Major warned, sowing the seeds of an ongoing Armageddon. ●

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