

Salam Shalom Peace

A report from Joyce Fraser, Barbara Lawler, Trish Harrison and Jane Mills on Women's Peace Circles just concluded in Sydney:

Building on an idea from *Creators of Peace*, a women's network originating in Africa, and under the umbrella of Initiatives of Change, a number of Women's Peace Circles have taken place in Australia – first in Adelaide, then in Melbourne, and last year and this year in Sydney.

The objective is to create a space for women of different cultural backgrounds and faiths, so that we can explore together our own peace creating ability, to enable us to generate peace in our homes and the wider community. The guiding principles are:

- Every person has a part to play and something to contribute
- Every person can start the process of transformation in their own life
- Every person has a story to tell and a need to be heard
- Every person can be a compassionate listener to the Truth within, to the truths of others, to the needs of the wider community.

A group of 6-12 women meet for an agreed number of sessions. We work through a series of topics and exercises about peacemaking, and share something of our own personal stories in an atmosphere of trust and respect.

In Sydney in September, we started with an introductory occasion in a community centre. This drew sixteen women, and out of it grew two peace circles, one on a Friday evening, the other on a Saturday morning. The material allows for eight sessions, but due to the lateness in the year, both groups opted for a series of four sessions. Both groups also asked for an extra session, so that they could view the video *For the Love of Tomorrow* about the French peacemaker Irene Laure.

Above is a picture of the Bardwell Park/Greenacre Peace Circle. Participants came from Lebanon, Kenya, Iraq, Rwanda, Burundi and Australia (including Torres Straits). Comments from those taking part include:



The Bardwell Park/Greenacre Peace Circle

- Listening to what others have experienced and suffered changes our thinking. Maybe we can change things.
- I can't be a prisoner of my past. I choose to forgive.
- You can't make peace between right and wrong. You need to educate yourself on the issues.
- Islam is not terrorist. I worry about my children's generation.
- I've held anger and disappointment inside me for many years. I am confronting this and starting the healing process.
- If you have suffered, you can help others and stand beside them.
- Offering hospitality is a way of building peace.

Stories about these peace circles have been sent to a number of local papers and there is great interest to create more in the coming year.

Clean election campaign gets under way in Solomon Islands

David Mills from Sydney has been in the Solomon Islands supporting the local IofC team (named *Winds of Change*) as they prepare for a Clean Election Campaign. He writes from Honiara:

The first two-day workshop for recruiting and training volunteers for the Clean Election Campaign (CEC) in Solomon Islands is in progress. There is an atmosphere of expectation and enthusiasm, as the possibility of helping to make a difference through this campaign grows.

Such workshops will run for the next two weeks in the conference room at the Winds of Change office in Honiara. It is being run by the young core-group of Winds of Change team, some of whom attended the Initiatives of Change

conference in Brisbane in July, and also a 'training the trainers' course based on IofC's *Life Matters* course in Tabalia, outside Honiara, three months ago.

Simple awareness

Their aim is to have teams of six to eight people traveling to most of the provinces to present the message of the CEC in the main centres ahead of the national elections in March 2006. These teams are scheduled to begin moving out across the country in mid-January. Already pilot campaigns have been run in the islands of

Malaita and Isobel during by-elections. Based on the successful model used in Taiwan, Kenya and in other places, where corruption has been destroying the democratic processes, a CEC uses simple awareness techniques asking all citizens to make a pledge not to offer or accept bribes before or after the election, and to use their vote wisely.

In the Winds of Change information brochure they say, "RAMSI (Regional Assistance Mission in Solomon Islands) has been successful in helping restore law, and bringing a peaceful environment in the country. But this really only establishes the foundation for us, as (we) begin the process of rebuilding our nation. We hope the programs we organise may encourage real change in the day to day living of everyone of us."

Gandhi's message in today's world

Professor Rajmohan Gandhi, an Indian writer, former Senator and grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, visited Britain with his wife Usha for two weeks, November 12-27, at the invitation of Initiatives of Change. As a Hindu, he has sought to heal divisions between Hindus and Muslims through his study of Muslim leaders. He is currently a visiting professor at the University of Illinois, USA. His powerful message of dialogue and bridge-building across the world's divides met a deep response from audiences across Britain and drew extensive press coverage. The following extracts are from his speech in Liverpool Hope University entitled "The relevance of the Gandhian ethic in today's world."

Gandhi's life contained several paradoxes. For a start, was he a saint (or one trying to be a saint) or a politician?... We see from accounts of his life that from childhood his conscience speaks to him: he should not, it says, copy in the exam despite the teacher's prodding; he should confess his stealing to his father. If he heeds such a conscience, as he does, is he trying to become a saint?

Yet after a few years the Inner Voice also asks a 23-year-old Gandhi, now in South Africa, not to return home from humiliation but to stay and fight; years later it asks him to organize a nationwide defiance over the salt tax; and later still to ask the British to Quit India. Since he did not confine his life to saying, "Love God and follow Him," but asked people to fight for their rights, we should perhaps say that the politician in him was stronger than the saint. He indeed took spiritual vows, but often in order to be politically effective. His vows of chastity and poverty freed him not *from* the world, but *for* action *in* the world ...

The Gandhi who was clear that the Indian constitution had to be secular freely spoke of himself as a loyal Hindu; his political discourse was rich in religious vocabulary without which, he knew, India's deeply religious masses, whether Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or Christian, could not be reached. The critical difference between Gandhi and the other Hindu political figures was that while Gandhi used his Hinduness to build bridges with Muslims, the others sought differentiation and at times conflict.

The contrast with Savarkar, the ideologue of the Hindu right, is particularly striking. Savarkar claimed that only those who saw India as both their homeland and their holy land could be reliable Indians, a criterion that made India's Muslims, Jews, and Christians disloyal by definition. Gandhi, on the other hand, insisted that the God of the

Hindus was the same as the God of the Muslims and of the Christians, and also that morality and humanity were more important than ancestry. Winning over many Hindus to such a view, Gandhi helped liberate Hinduism from the Indian earth. Though many Hindus thought of him as a Mahatma (great soul), a section of Hindus saw Gandhi as a violator of scriptural injunctions prescribing the practice of untouchability, and as one who weakened Hindus in their equation with Muslims. Gandhi's answer was that verses from scripture cited by his opponents "cannot be above reason and morality".

The difference today

Let me start by noting a critical if obvious difference between the period of the Cold War and our times: During the Cold War, when Communism ruled large sections of our world, many in the democracies thought that while the rulers of Communist states were tyrannical and evil, their people were innocent victims, good people like those living in the democracies. Today, by contrast, in our era of an apparent clash of civilizations, many in the democracies see the populations of Muslim lands as flawed, even while good relations are maintained, in many cases, with their rulers, who are viewed as people with whom business can be done. Such thinking has its counterpart in much of the Islamic world, which has seen persistent negative propaganda about Christians and the crusades, Jews and Zionism, and Americans and Europeans. The result is people-to-people distrust, and the possibility of people-to-people enmity. This is very different from the times of the Cold War, when there was great people-to-people empathy and warmth.

Islam the flaw?

When, as often happens, I hear the argument about the flawed nature of



Rajmohan Gandhi - photo by Dale Wain

Islam, I recall the faces and indeed the lives of Muslims I have known and know, I recall images of Muslims kneeling in prayer, or raising their arms in supplication to God, or carrying their dead or wounded on cold earthquake-hit slopes, and ask myself if I could truly believe that the Islam so practised was particularly and peculiarly flawed. Well, I cannot so believe. When I hear such an argument I also at times recall Winston Churchill speaking in June 1941 when Hitler attacked the Soviet Union. Having spent years warning about the dangers of Russian Communism, Churchill now had to summon support for an alliance with the Russians. "I see the 10,000 villages of Russia," he said, "where the means of existence was wrung so hardly from the soil, but where there are still primordial human joys, where maidens laugh and children play."

Well, Muslim maidens laugh too, and Muslim children also play, and all Muslims, Sunni or Shia, are grateful for primordial human joys. They hate terrorism as much as anybody else in the world, and perhaps even more, for more Muslims have been killed in terrorist acts than non-Muslims. In Rwanda in 1994, some massacres actually took place in churches. Did that make the Rwanda killings a Christian crime? When, in the 1970s, Buddhist Cambodia was the venue for the killing fields, did the killing reflect an innate Buddhist flaw? When, a couple of years ago, almost all members of the royal family of the Hindu kingdom of Nepal were shot dead, and, later, a large number of peasants and security men were killed in shootings, was some Hindu teaching to blame?

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Today many in different parts of the world accept that while all others are innocent unless proved guilty, a Muslim is guilty unless he or she demonstrates innocence. Governments, immigration officers, agents at check-in counters, landlords, newspaper reporters, taxi-drivers, and employers now make at least a mental note, if they do not offer a visible or audible expression, when they find that the person they are dealing with is a Muslim.

Today's task

Towards the end of his life Gandhi had to address the Hindu-Muslim divide. As tensions rose shortly before Indian independence he was asked whether it was right to kill a mad dog - the implication being that Muslims were like mad dogs and deserved to be destroyed. Gandhi replied, "When I was about ten, a brother of mine had gone mad. In a fit of madness he would rush out and strike everyone. But what could I do? Could I beat him? Or could my mother and father beat him? A doctor was called in and he was asked to treat my brother in every possible manner except by beating him. He was my blood brother. But now I make no such distinctions. Now all of you, [Hindus and Muslims], are my blood brothers. If all of you lose your sanity and I happen to have an army at my disposal, do you think I should have you shot?" Asking himself, "who are my people", Gandhi had concluded years earlier, despite the background in which he was raised, that Muslims were as much his people as Hindus.

Many are perhaps aware of the inscription at Hiroshima that says, "We will not let this happen again." Who the "we" is, what the "this" is, is wisely left for the visitor to decide. "We will not let this happen again."

Like several others, I have for years longed for a memorial in India and Pakistan where every name of the victims of 1947 is recorded, where their death is mourned and their life remembered, a memorial before which every visitor, Indian, Pakistani or another, a Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or anyone else, would want to say inwardly, "We will not let this happen again."

I feel this is the sort of thing that Gandhi says to us today. I think he asks us to play our part in bridging the divide between the Muslim world and the West, the global counterpart in the 21st Century of India's 1947 tensions.

Reaching the villages of India

Initiatives of Change, India, ran a training program on the theme "Being the change you want to see in the world" for a leaders of a government agency MAVIM which works for economic empowerment of women in rural areas across the State of Maharashtra. IofC worker Priya Gujar writes:

The twin aims of the program were: (a) for participants to understand and accept this way of change themselves; and (b) to jointly develop a 2-day training program based on IofC principles to be delivered to and by their village level sahyoginis (women co-workers) to village women in all the 34 districts of Maharashtra.

The participants shared some of the challenges and difficulties they faced – inequalities in subsidies, political interference, uncooperative banks and lack of awareness at the grass roots level.

After input on relationships and learning about listening in silence to the inner voice, some began to share about areas they needed to change. One of the participants recognised that he was rude

- I will never use public money for personal use and will never bribe anyone.
- I will create an atmosphere of trust amongst my colleagues ... and try to create employment based on agriculture at the village level.
- I will never take or give a bribe.
- I will spread word against gender discrimination.
- I will get self-help groups in my district to get loans by the end of March 2006 and would discourage corruption in the process...
- I will try to get the female literacy rate up from 20% to at least 50%.
- I will encourage anti-corruption campaigns.
- I will save money and not waste it on



Rural India - photo by John Freebury

to his wife and never respected her. Another said that she would apologize to her husband for not treating him well and clear-up misunderstandings. A decision to improve relations with father and brother was made by another participant. Other decisions included:

- I will not misuse office electricity, paper and money and will try to save all these and will see others do so too.
- I will use these ideas with the youth as we spread the crucial knowledge of building toilets at the village level.
- I will be honest myself and with my family too; and say 'no' to corruption and addictions.
- I will never again booze or encourage others towards this as well.

unnecessary luxuries, and help in decreasing malnutrition.

Drawing on what they themselves had gained the participants then designed a 10 hour program module to introduce these ideas to the field workers in the villages.

They seem to have become a team with us in the work of bringing change through a change in individuals. As a group they have decided to come with their spouses and children for the next IofC Family Conference in May 2006.

The MAVIM program gave us an opportunity to model how IofC can be taken to other government agencies. This could be a new beginning where IofC might touch the lives of the people in all the villages of Maharashtra.

Michael Thwaites - man of poetry and faith

Under the headline "Poet versed in war and counterespionage", Melbourne's *The Age* honoured Michael Thwaites who died in November. Obituaries also appeared in *The Australian*, the *Canberra Times* and Britain's *Times*, *Guardian*, *Independent* and *Daily Telegraph* newspapers. In *The Age*, John Farquharson wrote about "Thwaites' Christian faith, strengthened through his lifelong involvement with Moral Re-Armament", which infused his verse.

Most of the papers focussed on Thwaites' role in debriefing Vladimir Petrov, a senior KGB defector. However, writes Michael's son Peter Thwaites, "at the funeral the two themes were poetry and faith which were the deepest things in my father's life. He did not just 'write poetry' but knew a huge amount of other people's poetry (Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, Tennyson etc) and often quoted passages of it from memory to fit some situation."

Bishop George Browning, (of Canberra and Goulburn) in his funeral address said: "I will always think of Michael as the quintessential man of faith and the ideal model of a Christian man ... Michael's faith is my kind of faith. A faith that never closed you down through prescription, but opened you up through metaphor; never bogged you down with dogma, but released you through symbol."

Michael Thwaites' collected poems Unfinished Journey is available from Grosvenor Books (address below), price \$25 postage included.

Astronomy

Newsbriefs wishes all its readers a happy Christmas. This seasonal poem Astronomy is part of Michael Thwaites' volume Unfinished Journey.

"The love that moves the sun and all the stars" -
When Dante wrote there was no telescope:
Beneath his feet, the damned and their despairs,
Above, the spheres, a Paradise, and hope.

A supernova seen from Siding Spring
Ten thousand million light-years from our Earth -
Where will it meet with angels on the wing
Shepherds and Bethlehem, the stable birth?

Or was a fable fathered by desire?
What pledge of peace, goodwill, or mercy mild
In myriad galaxies of ice and fire?
Yet star-led sages, searching, found a child

Born to unlock a universe's power
Streaming from scaffolds, bursting prison bars,
And children, kneeling, find amid the straw
The love that moves the sun and all the stars.

Book talk

Do something about it

by Bill Porter

Presented as a "media man's story", Bill Porter's autobiography is made up of three parts. It tells us his rise from freelance writer to executive of a Dutch publishing multinational, his journey of love with his late wife Sonja and finally, his campaign to bring about better standards within the media.

Porter's eye for detail in the first part makes an attractive read. His observations and analysis of events are entertaining and include a few anecdotes from the industry that are very interesting to the budding reporter.

The second part tells the ups and downs of Porter's married life. His wife survived a concentration camp and a death sentence, to emerge with her brutal honesty still intact (which contributed to a few embarrassing moments for Porter). Porter's willingness to be honest about even very shameful moments in his married life makes this love story engaging and he has some good advice for those in a long-term relationship.

"Destiny", the title of the final section, provides the reader with an appreciation and respect for Porter's crusade for better standards in the media. Porter goes into detail about how he set up an organisation to fight for this and the many and varied "ideas" people whom he met and who helped along the way. His essay "The Battleline of Civilisation" in the appendix is brilliant and I highly recommend reading this. *Andrew "roo" O'Loughlin*

Price \$25, postage included from Grosvenor Books, 226 Kooyong Rd, Toorak, VIC 3142. Tel. 03 9822 1218

Having finished his stint as assistant editor for his university's paper Tharunka and his double degree in Science/Arts, Mr O'Loughlin is now looking for employment. If you can help him in this quest, please email him at rokiroo@hotmail.com or call 0423 742 904.

In Brief

Life Matters

The next *Life Matters* course will run from Friday 3 February to Sunday 12 February at Armagh, the IofC centre in Melbourne. *Life Matters* is a nine-day course for young adults to shape a path and purpose for living. Its aims are to develop skills and character strengths for those who want to bring change around

them; to help each person discover their own distinctive contribution and to provide an opportunity for participants to live, work and study with people from different cultures and backgrounds within the Australian community and from overseas. For more information, e-mail lifematters@mra.org.au or call (03) 9822 1218.

Action for Life 3

No, not the title of the latest Arnold Schwarzenegger blockbuster, but the third nine-month program of training and outreach for young people of all ages has started at Asia Plateau, the Initiatives of Change centre in Maharashtra, India. First weeks were spent looking at some of the basics ideas of IofC such as taking time in silence to reflect on our lives, and looking at the qualities of love, unselfishness, purity and honesty. One of the participants, Alex Birnberg from Australia, wrote: "Before coming on AfL I have struggled for meaning and direction ... By beginning to trust myself and to use these moral standards as a guide to my actions, I have been able to free myself from the fears and insecurities that held me."