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Dear friends,

Gratitude and despair mix as I sit down to write this second to last letter. Gratitude for this intense, rich, turbulent week; despair that it is possible to do it justice, to recapture it in words on paper or on the screen. There have been even more things going on at the same time than usual, and I still haven't learnt to be in several places at the same time; and it is even more true than usual that most of the deeper life is being reflected in the safer intimacy of the communities! There's a touch, not of despair perhaps, but of sadness at the reminders of the cruelty and horrors of the world that many have brought with them and that we have received through these days via the media. The 'Agenda for Reconciliation' session closed yesterday morning; the hall and the front of the house have been bustling with departures, the numbers drop from their peak - and some are just arriving for the last lap, the final session on 'A Conversation on Aims and Values for the Next Century'.

The weather has been very hot, almost unbearably so down the hill, with magnificent thunder storms slowly building up, and then discharging and cooling us a little. And there've been similar moments in the conference! This AFR (Agenda for Reconciliation) has not been easy or painless, nor can it be: so many in the house bring such hurts, such history with them. We are living on the edge, or on several edges. Many are tired as we come towards the end of a busy summer. We need added gentleness and grace with each other. When, for example, there are Chinese from Taiwan and from the Mainland, Jews and Arabs, together in the same house, tensions are inevitable. We (I) can be impatient, want to hurry people out of hurt to healing, beyond anger to forgiveness - then I recall the story of Irène Laure and the three days and nights of inner struggle that it took her to reach out to the Germans, and I recall the months that it has taken me to even start to find healing from my own deepest hurts and hates.

We started with a couple of mistakes, errors committed under stress. But then the aim is not to avoid mistakes, but to love each other and to serve each other and God - and learn and live life to the full. So it has not been a faultless time - what is faultless that is human? - but for my money, it has been a time of the Holy Spirit. But now I have to give you some idea of how. I look at my pages and pages of notes. How can I distil all this? You can of course look at all the press releases - if you have started to use a computer and modem, you may have even seen them as they came out on the Caux pages on the World Wide Web.

There are questions that live with me, that we can all ask ourselves. We started with a session on 'Healing history - remembering, restoring and forgiving'. The leader of the meeting, himself deeply stirred at times, asked us: Should I take responsibility for the wrongdoing of my country, both past and present? Is there a past to be healed in my family, and do I see a place where I can start? Which do I find easier, to say sorry or to forgive? James Hore-Ruthven, whose family over generations was involved in the building up the British Empire gave us a thought-out, in-depth picture: the truth is so much more interesting and exciting than the myth; and to know history is an important part of putting right what we can. An Australian Aboriginal woman, a senior advisor on health questions to her government talked about their 'National Sorry Day' and her own agonising forced separation from her mother - taken away when she was 4 years old, she only met her mother again when she was 28. Despite her government's refusal to apologise, this national people's movement to say sorry has helped her to find freedom and healing. 'Our people are not victims any more,' she said. I am struck afresh how in so many countries these questions of history and apology are coming high up the political and media agendas.

An Israeli speaks, with great humility and courage, and an American expert in international relations sums up: 'Reconciliation is the real realpolitik. Power doesn't bring security.' I hurry to write and check a press release, and I'm still sending it out by fax as the Swiss Radio International is telephoning to ask for an interview with Yehezkel Landau, the Israeli. In another forum, a young Lebanese makes an angry speech in guise of a question. There are strong currents running in the house, with many Arabs, some Palestinians, two Israeli Knesset members taking part in the Politicians Round Table (34 politicians, from 23 countries, meeting informally in private session). Koreans call for a fresh start in their relationship with

Japan; the Japanese apologise for their country's past actions.

Three very full afternoon seminars with between 70 and 100 people, including several imams and Muslim leaders, and two senior police officers from Holland, look into 'Europe and its Muslim communities - seeking the common good'. It is not easy listening for the white 'Christian' Europeans, but the Muslims feel free here to express their pain at 'Islamophobia', the fear and prejudice that their faith provokes all too often. European Europeans express recognition and gratitude for all that the Arab and Muslim civilisation has brought to our continent. It is a precious start, and all agree that this quest together must be taken further, must become more of a dialogue. But what a precious thing it has been to have Muslim leaders sitting with us in our planning meetings, sharing with us their perceptions, praying with us for the spirit of the conference.

As the sun drops towards the Jura one evening, a group of us gather on the terrace with our Japanese friends Yukihiisa (now a Member of Parliament, and one of those at the heart of the Politicians' Round Table) and Leiko Fujita, and their daughter Ai. They have brought from Japan some of the ashes of their son and brother, Yukihide, killed last year in a tragic accident. The ashes are buried near the play area he had loved as a child. Son Soubert, a Cambodian friend (the Vice-President of the National Assembly) speaks of Yukihide's love and concern for his country, and how some of his ashes have found a home in an orphanage he has started near Phnom Penh. A moment of deep emotion - and then we hurry on to an evening with a panel of politicians, including Yukihiisa. The intimate and the global, the personal and the national. Later, in an amazing display of disciplined speaking, seven of them report back to the full conference in a little under an hour.

There is an evening with a former Iranian ambassador - in the presence of an Iranian diplomat who has come up specially from Geneva. We range over politics, history, philosophy, and questions about terrorism and the place of the woman in Islam and in Iran. And not for the first time, I have the feeling that there are currents, there are things going on in and between people that I can't quite understand, like a music that I cannot hear. There is something going on between those from the Middle East. In another meeting, a Lebanese woman speaks in Arabic - and I have the same feeling. Something important is going on, is being said, but I cannot say what. I feel it again with the Africans, who are meeting among themselves, but who are also expressing in the open meetings the terrible sufferings of their continent. As a Westerner, a European, I understand the words, what is said, but I'm not quite understanding their meaning or the significance.

It is Pakistan's national day, and a chorus, largely made up of Indians sings the national anthem. The following day, it is India's turn, and a Pakistani, overcoming his feelings, is there, wearing like many of us a little Indian flag, singing the Indian national anthem. A senior British friend amazes us all and brings gales of laughter and a healthy gust of fresh air into an intense planning meeting with a humorous poem of apology to his neighbour - in the middle of the night, he'd got up and raided the fridge, 'borrowing' milk that was clearly labelled for use by the children. An evening with the African-American singer Joe Carter takes us into the painful history of his people through the magic of music. He is a big man, with a big voice and a big heart. I find myself sitting in the second row with a young man who is so moved by the history of slavery and suffering that he is sobbing. We hold hands. I ask him if he wants to leave, and he nods, so we walk together to the back where he re-joins his parents. He is 4 years old. Another sees most of the household getting on buses and going off for an outing, to Bern, Lausanne, Gruyère, the Emosson dam high in the Alps - an amazing feat of organisation. The Chinese and Sudanese ambassadors are welcomed on different days, speak frankly with small groups of friends of their countries. A magical final variety evening, in the best of the Caux tradition: African drums, Indian dances, music and sketches, Chinese calligraphy and songs from a group of Taiwan and Mainland Chinese, the retired postmaster of Caux on his violin...

We have also, in the midst of all else - how did we do it? - been taking time to think and plan for Caux 1999 (starting with a Christmas-New Year conference, taken on by a group of Dutch and younger Swiss). There are some excellent ideas for the theme and the programme, and a draft of possible dates. Keep tuned in, and we'll keep you informed.

Slightly weary and grateful greetings from this amazing home for humanity,

Andrew Stallybrass