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Dear friends,

I am back at my post in Caux, safe and sound after my days away in the Alps, climbing with my brother. I was part of the horde heading up the hill, a modest part of the flow of life and experience gathering for another important session. We move from one 'peak', the 'Hope in the Cities' session, to another, the 'Agenda for Reconciliation'. And for me, I move from the lonely peaks of the Bernese Oberland and the Valais frontier with Italy to the bustle of a very full Caux, refreshed and stretched in body and spirit. The weather has been very mixed - fine and hot much of the time, but with some memorable and massive thunder storms, with violent winds. My brother and I had to surrender our plans for our final day of climbing - our peak, the Dent Blanche, was living up to its name and was covered in fresh snow and ice. As our guide said philosophically, 'She'll still be there next year.'

My thanks go to John Everington, who kept you all - including myself - informed about the goings on here with last week's letter. John left before the close of the previous 'Hope in the Cities' session. 'Other Men's Flowers' is the title of a lovely little anthology of poetry by Field Marshall Lord Wavell, and I am forced to rely on other people's notes! I was very glad to hear that a very influential Muslim leader from Geneva had been up to Caux (at last- we've invited him many times) - he'd heard on the bush telegraph about a talk given in Caux by a friend of his father. Could he come?

'Honest conversation' was one of the aims of these 'Hope in the Cities' days, and in the main sessions, in the community groups and workshops, in individual conversations and encounters, there has been much honesty, often painful, between black and white, Muslim and Christian, Arab and Jew, Palestinian and Israeli. Rob Corcoran, one of the organisers, spoke of honest conversations 'that include everyone, exclude no-one, focused not on identifying enemies but on finding unexpected allies, and which move beyond blame and pain to constructive action'. An Imam, originally from Pakistan, but living in Britain for 27 years now told how he had faced two clear choices: to keep quiet and try to be like others, earning his living, or to look into his own prejudices, and to try to build bridges with others, 'to go and talk with Jewish and Hindu friends, and also with Muslims who were fighting among themselves'. Their bridge-building work back in Britain had started with four communities, and now reached 58!

An African American said, 'Across the chasm of race, white and black people were saying to each other: "You just need to know more of the facts." But the problems can never be resolved on factual information alone, because each side has its own bona fide set of facts based on their own experience. The problem of race is more a problem of spirit and emotions.' One of the multi-racial municipal delegation from

Middleburg in South Africa noted that the community meetings in Caux had provided opportunities for 'honest conversations' with others, but that the most important honest conversation was with oneself, 'an inward conversation', where you can make resolutions with yourself. The South Africans shared a workshop with a group from Richmond, Virginia, USA; a group from Israel with a presentation from Mumbai, India. An African-American and a white American, working together in the 'Hope in the Cities' office demonstrated with humility and humour some of the problems of culture clash and personal particularities that they'd had to work through before they could work together. The strange alchemy of Caux was at work.

The conversations were intense and varied: between 43 people discussing 'Europe and its Muslim communities', between African-Americans and South Africans debating 'affirmative action', between community workers in Brazil and the exuberant young people of *Gente que Avanza*, a Palestinian fascinated and appalled by what he heard from an Australian Aboriginal about the 'stolen generation' of children taken from their families under the policy of assimilation. Some conversations went on until well after midnight round a bonfire; others started first thing each morning with the basics of 'sustaining the builders of community'. Story after story, shared in main sessions, workshops and communities, illustrated the action that is growing out of these 'honest conversations'.

An 11-year-old Israeli boy amazed his father by turning down the possibility of a trip to a chocolate factory to stay with his service shift, and work with his friends. An Indian widow shared how she had worked persistently to restore a difficult relationship with a sister-in-law, and an American listening to her was moved to decide to work on a similar difficult relationship, and 'not to carry the problem with him to the grave'. The work of 'cleaning the slate' goes on!

Yesterday afternoon saw an impromptu concert by a busload of Moldovan children. Their director had been to Caux as part of a quartet last year; they were in Montreux, on their way back from a choir festival. On impulse, he drove up by taxi: could they drop in and sing for us on their way to Italy and their next concert? So as the last participants arrived, the house rang to their voices.

Reconciliation was a missing factor in the work of diplomats and politicians, said Eduard Brunner, the Swiss former Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs at last night's opening of the 'Agenda for Reconciliation'. 'It is easier to stop a conflict than to bring about reconciliation,' he said, 'but we talk little about this factor other than here in Caux.' He referred to the many conflicts that had sprung up in Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The communist period had put conflicts into the freezer, but when the ice melted, the conflicts came to life again, he noted. The needed art was to 'help people to live together as brothers, and sisters'. The senior Swiss diplomat was opening the 'Agenda for Reconciliation' session aimed at 'reinforcing peace-making initiatives'.

Some 450 participants now in the house from 60 countries and every continent also heard from speakers from Cambodia, Northern Ireland, Lebanon, and Rwanda. 'What is happening in this house is critical to the future,' said a participant from Northern Ireland. 'The record of the last 100 years is of much sorrow, but there are also reasons for hope. We see here individuals and groups working for positive change, people making a difference. Peace is possible where it seems impossible, if it starts with you and me.'

Warm regards from this privileged and beautiful place,

Andrew Stallybrass