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Caux, 6.08.01

Dear friends,

The clouds are rolling away, the sun is returning after two days of rain that drove us inside, and brought the temperatures down. The air has that sharp, tangy clarity, washed clean of all the dust. I'm sitting at my screen on a Sunday afternoon – very unusual. But then, this is the first time that I've taken part in a Consultation in Caux, and we may be on the brink of changing the name of MRA. We really will value all your thoughts and prayers over these days, that we will together discern God's leading for our work. After one story in a Geneva paper that mentioned a possible change of name for MRA, the Protestant news agency sent out a story, and the regional paper in Montreux picked up and expanded on it. We cannot say that there is no interest!

A fresh breeze is blowing – and there has been quite a strong wind of the spirit blowing all week through this vast, complex mass of people and pain, of humanity and hope that is the 'Agenda for Reconciliation'. I have the feeling that I'm always trotting out the same old excuse, that so much is happening, and I can't possibly 'cover' it all. The Agenda opened on Tuesday evening with a remarkable and much commented-on talk by Dr Donald Shriver, author of an acknowledged classic on forgiveness in politics. At Wednesday's 3pm planning meeting I was touched to see a Muslim Imam hurrying out with Bryan Hamlin to meet Jewish Rabbi Marc Gopin off a train – a simple mark of a deep friendship and fellowship across one of the great and painful divides that sears us daily, an illustration of the answer.

Two days later Marc Gopin tells us that these days have helped him to heal his weary soul and find refreshment. On the vegetable team cutting carrots, he had such a sense of pride at lunch seeing the result of his handiwork being served up! 'Where is God in the middle of a war,' he asks, and answers himself, 'It is not God but us that is missing.' For the first time he had brought his prayer shawl and phylacteries, and had worn them to pray on his balcony, feeling a little ridiculous. But another friend noted that at last he is bringing all of himself to Caux. Another Rabbi comes from Geneva for a first visit, and finds himself at his first meal sitting with the Roman Catholic Bishop of Banja Luka in the Serb part of Bosnia.

There have been a group of 15 from Bosnia-Herzegovina, from the different communities; a Chinese delegation from the Chinese Association for International Understanding; a group of some thirty taking part in a private round table meeting on the 'Great Lakes Region' in Africa – Rwanda, Burundi, Congo, Uganda. Other Africans from Sierra Leone, from the Sudan; a small group from Israel and Palestine; a delegation from the Nakoda native American people of Alberta, Canada – 3 Chiefs and others, brought by Elder Bill McLean, the son of Chief Walking Buffalo, who went round the world with MRA nearly 40 years ago. One hallmark that has struck me is the contribution of exiles to so many of these peace-making and peace-building efforts. The young Serb Caux Scholar and the Rwandan both now in Canada, the Dane (now) but formerly from Sierra Leone.

Later in the week, after several private meetings, an Israeli and a Palestinian spoke together from the platform, pledging to work together towards just solutions.

So much of the deeper dialogue as always is in the communities, or just in small groups, out on the terrace, or in some quiet corner of the house. At the final meeting, the Sierra Leone group, which included people from the government and from the rebel side, spoke together from the platform. 'We didn't meet in a room, we met outside under the trees,' said the Deputy Speaker of the Parliament. 'We were afraid we might explode inside, but outside, we could run away!'

The house has been close to full, with numbers well over 400 all week, and 67 countries named present at the opening. Fresh rows of chairs have been sprouting in the hall like mushrooms. A colourful backdrop of large stage flats showed little figures reaching from one to another up to a globe with all the continents on it. In a meeting on 'the difficult other' the President of the Saint Egidio community in Rome noted that he hadn't yet met the easy – 'We're all difficult,' he concluded.

You will see from the enclosed press release that we have had another Caux Lecture, from another important figure in the United Nations system. Rubens Ricupero, the Secretary General of UNCTAD, a personal friend of Cornelio Sommaruga, linked the theme of the Caux conferences with the headlines of recent weeks with the violent responses to globalization.

Beyond all the words, and even the tears, there has been memorable music from the Fitzwilliam String quartet, an early wakening by the local band for the usual Swiss National Day celebrations of fire and fireworks, and an evening of even more than usual variety. There were poems in several languages, music of all kinds. Chinese and Taiwanese sang together of 'the new dragon family'; Sudanese women performed a bridal dance; a Frenchman baffled us with magic; Latin Americans and Africans danced. 'Baffled by grace,' the phrase rings in my mind from an American woman's poem of a true encounter on the subway, but doesn't this describe so well the feeling many share here of touching on something too deep for words and for Monday letters!

'Here I feel I belong to the family of mankind. It makes me feel responsible. Thank you or the new hope I've found here for all those who have lost their dignity,' says the bishop. Nine tenths of his flock were driven away in ethnic cleansing. 'Some climb mountains to be alone and to find themselves,' says another speaker, 'but here it is to meet the other – and to discover that the other is not other than ourselves.' A cabinet minister from the Democratic Republic of Congo tells how she had come to Caux filled with hate and hurt five years ago. 'This is a place to heal inner hurts,' she says, 'after two days here, I wondered where my hate had gone. Hate is a prison and a poison. I felt freed. I met people open to my suffering, and I met others who had suffered more than myself.' She had experienced this again this visit with those she had considered to be her countries enemies – but how to bring this experience to the millions who needed it at home?

A political leader from Burundi speaks of his life-changing experience strapped in to an airline seat next to a man from the other ethnic community whom he'd considered an enemy – and discovering the humanity of the other for the first time. And now they are here together in Caux. 'We're going to be ambassadors for reconciliation,' says the Sierra Leonian lady, standing together with her compatriots. She's just told us that she had lost husband, father and mother in the chaotic killing fields of her country's breakdown.

Now many are leaving, back to the dangers and difficulties from which they came, perhaps with fresh insights, hope renewed. We all carry each other in thought and prayer. The church services this morning had a deeper resonance, as did the moving prayer from the Muslim Imam that closed the final meeting – before we formed one large circle as our Nakoda friends from Canada chanted and drummed a heart-beat rhythm.

Weary but grateful greetings from Caux, Andrew Stallybrass