



Caux, Monday 4th August 2003

Dear friends,

I stole away from Caux for two nights, with a long day and a half hiking through the Alps behind the Dents du Midi, pushing my legs to the limit, changing the air between my ears, and enjoying the continuing fine, hot weather. Arriving back in Caux, there's been yet another changeover. There seemed to be a rich variety of people before, but there are definitely more Africans in the house now, and the board in the Economat with the house count notes the numbers stretching beyond 400 for the first time.

'Peace-building initiatives' is the title for this *Agenda for Reconciliation* conference. It opened on Saturday afternoon. Sam Doe from Liberia is a former Caux Scholar, who then came back as an intern, and has now served on the faculty of the program – he is the Executive director of the West African Network for Peace Building. He painted a grim picture of his beloved continent and its people's indescribable sufferings, with its millions of nameless dead, drawing from his own experiences. 'After years of working with individuals throughout Africa, I have come to the painful realization that personal transformation cannot be sustained in an un-nurturing environment,' he said, after telling of seeing one child soldier he thought he'd 'saved' turn back to fighting. 'Failed, failing or collapsed states are the single most important reason for the terrible conflicts and the total disorder experienced in Africa today,' he continued. State-building had to be part of the challenge we address, mobilizing civil society organizations, and building coalitions, he challenged, concluding with a vision of a continent where Africans 'will learn war no more and hunger and disease will be overcome'.

The African Great Lakes Round Table takes up this challenge for third consecutive year, after the usual miracles for travel documents and visas, and long phone calls to embassies and consular officials. The exhaustion after 20 years of civil war gives peacemakers a chance, says one of the participants, of one of the countries he's involved in. As one who has tried to serve Africa, and who loves the continent deeply, I long for greater international involvement – but also for a clearer idea of what help (and outside intervention?) is welcome, and what must be left to Africans. As our governments seem readier to take risks to intervene even with combat troops, are we not meant to be more vigilant about what our businesses do in creating and supporting civil strife and rebellions?

There are as always at these times too many choices, too many things going on at the same time – and I've still not learnt the skill of ubiquity! The Caux Scholars were offering a workshop, and I'd have loved to hear from this excellent group and to get a clearer picture of what they've been learning, or to hear more from Doug Johnson about his latest book on *Faith-Based Diplomacy – Trumping Realpolitik*. But instead, I went to hear from an impressive group from Papua, the Indonesian province, which is struggling for autonomy and justice. They presented the history of their island, their longing for a peaceful settlement, and their hopes for improving their peace-making skills. A man and a woman in traditional dress, with body-paint and seashell decorations sang a haunting lament to victims of government repression. It is clear that heart and mind-stretching days lie ahead.

But what a rich time already lies behind us. I am amazed at what we manage to fit in to a week here! Last Monday we were still in the thick of *The Spiritual Factor in Secular Society* conference. We'd just had a notable introduction to our theme by German theologian Reinhard Kirste, head of a European inter-religious think-tank. We heard from a young Christian from Lebanon and a Muslim university lecturer from Tunisia, who chanted from the Koran. Then there was a memorable workshop from our Lebanese friends, with their deep experience of



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working together for healing and reconciliation. A group of young Germans, Christians and Muslims, presented their play about *Abraham Today*, the common father of the three monotheistic faiths. They had prepared their play with the help of Jews, but the kipa-wearing young actor playing the Jew on stage was a Muslim! It was an experience to sit through the play sitting next to an Orthodox Rabbi – who was chuckling and laughing, following the French translation. The cast were wowed by their experience of Caux, and discovering so many others sharing their concerns for dialogue and understanding between the faiths. The Rabbi gave us a fascinating insight into his understanding of the merciful interpretation of the law (of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth), and into the tension between absolute justice and forgiveness.

Last Tuesday was one of the great days of the summer in Caux, with the public Lecture by Chiara Lubich (you can find the press release on the Caux web site), the founder of the Focolari movement. The house was buzzing with excitement all day as many day-visitors came arrived for the event, including many members of this Catholic lay movement – it was hard to find parking in the village, and the number plates came from all over Switzerland, and beyond. The Catholic Bishop of this area was there in the front row: He grew up in Montreux, but this was his first visit to the centre. The theatre was packed and there was an overflow watching on video in the Great Hall. Her message of love and respect for the other, bridging the differences between faiths, was right at the heart of the week's focus, where many were wrestling with the difficult questions of how to be true to their own faith while still being open to others. The TV unit of the movement is coming back this week to get more footage on Caux-IC.

The community groups saw deep sharing. I was a little puzzled that in our group we seemed to share so deeply and so personally – and so little about inter-religious questions. This was anything but a theoretical or intellectual venture. Our fragilities and search brought us all together. But one wise friend said to me, 'That's the spiritual factor!' Very deep personal hurts were shared, and some steps taken towards healing. A Latin American Catholic spoke of going home to try to bring understanding with local Protestants – 'We see them as enemies,' she said. 'I want to learn to look at the picture and not at the frame,' said a Slovenian, speaking of the way she felt she'd started to see into the essence of the other faiths. Swedes present invited the Dutch group to visit them in Sweden and share their experiences of dialogue and working together. 'If we're committed to *Initiatives of Change*,' said John Taylor, who headed the World Council of Churches inter-religious dialogue department for ten years, 'it's because we're first and foremost committed to changing ourselves.'

The highlight, at the close, after our last meeting, was an inter-religious celebration in the bay window of the Great Hall, lead by two of the strong Dutch contingent, an Imam and a Protestant minister. It was on the theme of light, and 'moving from passion to compassion'. 'God's light is not for East or West, but for all Creation,' the Palestine-born Imam said. The lighting effects on the lake were a perfect backdrop beside Hester Mila-Groeneweg's work of art. We sang music from Taizé and a Sufi song that we'd rehearsed the night before (the Rabbi joining in spontaneously), the Rabbi sang a Psalm in a fine voice and a Romanian Orthodox also sang. The minister recited the Lord's Prayer, with the Imam reading parallel passages from the Koran between each phrase. We ended by lighting candles. 'It's the most perfect moment that I've experienced in Caux,' a young Hindu friend told me.

Greetings from a close-to-full Caux,

Andrew Stallybrass