

## Worship and Action Update, 10/16/03

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

**Where is our Peace Testimony leading New York Yearly Meeting Friends now? What if it leads us to begin in our monthly meetings? What are our responsibilities in these times?**

Last week's Update spoke about Walter Wink's observation (in *Unmasking the Powers*, at page 94) that "The angels of nations are not static, changeless entities, nor are their vocations irrevocably fixed in their foundation." That insight was illuminated by the example of Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders) and the reminder of James Orbinski that:

As with slavery and welfare rights, history has shown that humanitarian preoccupations born in civil society have gained influence until they reach the political agenda.

For many years, the land of Israel and Palestine has been a place tormented by a dearth of political imagination and a lack of willingness to take chances for peace; a place that exemplifies Martin Luther King Jr.'s warning (in *Strength To Love*, 1963) that "[h]ate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction." This is and has long been a place whose peoples are continuously battered by political agendas of states near and abroad.

Among Friends, discussion and worship on the Israel-Palestine tragedy and dilemmas often is difficult. Outrage at the misery of the Palestinians may be heard as insensitivity to the fears of Israelis. And condemnation of suicide bombers may be understood as legitimization of military incursions and assassinations, curfews, destruction of homes, civilian deaths. To some, this part of the Middle East is better left unconsidered for fear of the deep wounds and rents it can cause in a meeting.

Yet Friends' Peace Testimony does not have an exception for intractable conflicts, nor for concerns about which we have not found unity within our own Religious Society. We know that Israelis and Palestinians, too, are all God's children; that we are called not to assign blame for this tragedy, but to assist in recognizing and reaching out to the humanity of those in the grip of its rage and insanity; and that we cannot be faithful to our Testimony if we bicker over righteousness or, in an effort to avoid our own conflicts, ignore the needs of people living with violence.

Many outside government are occupied by the search for means to alleviate the lives of terror being lived by Israelis and Palestinians. Many have joined in the search for effective tools of hope and reconciliation, of acknowledgment and forgiveness.

We may find inspiration in the many personal examples of courage in the face of violence. The courage of a Rachel Corrie, who gave her life by standing before a bulldozer in the hope of preventing it from destroying a family's home in Gaza. The courage of Israeli reserve pilots, who declared the wrongness of incursions on

Palestinian villages and that they would no longer fly such missions. The courage of Christian Peacemaker Teams volunteers in Hebron and other towns in the Palestinian territories, and of thousands of other nongovernmental organizations that work to save lives, provide for people's needs, and advocate for nonviolence and resolution in both Palestine and Israel. (Christian Peacemaker Teams is a program of Brethren, Quaker, and Mennonite Churches and other Christians that support nonviolence. Its Web site is at [www.cpt.org](http://www.cpt.org).) The courage of Israelis and Palestinians who have sought to devise peace accords outside the arena of government. (See "Beilin-Abed Rabbo Accord Infuriates Right," by Mazal Mualem, *Haaretz*, October 13, 2003, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/349104.html>.)

Some Friends are involved with longstanding constructive efforts to bring reason, reconciliation, growth, and peace to this troubled land, such as Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam ([www.nswas.com](http://www.nswas.com)); Mubarak Awad and his Nonviolence International ([www.nonviolenceinternational.net](http://www.nonviolenceinternational.net)); the Friends School in Ramallah ([www.palfriends.org](http://www.palfriends.org)).

We may learn and be inspired by voices of experience, wisdom, and reason.

Avraham Burg is a Labour party member of Israel's Knesset and was speaker of the Knesset from 1999 to 2003. In a recent comment in the *Guardian*, a British daily, he spoke of the need for personal sacrifice and forgiveness in the cause of peace ("We Must Compromise Our Dreams," October 9, 2003, [www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,1059003,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,1059003,00.html)):

My resume is no secret. My mother was born in Hebron in 1921, a seventh generation Hebron Jew. I am the eighth generation. My family's deep link to the city of the patriarchs was cruelly severed in the summer of 1929, when rioters slaughtered half my family. The other half - my grandfather, uncles, aunts and my mother - was saved by their Arab landlord. Ever since, my family has been divided in half. One half will never again trust a Palestinian. The other half will never stop searching for neighbours who seek peace.

I have the right of return to the city from which we were expelled. I will never give up this right, but I have no intention of exercising it, because I also have an obligation to create a life free of unending death and conflict. The right to life of my children and the children of Hebron takes precedence over the right to slaughter one another on the altar of land and hearth. I am mad with anger. I see my dreams and the dreams of my Jewish and Arab friends consumed in the flame of extremism. I am angry with the Palestinians, and with the terrible meanings they allow too many of their religious teachers to impose on the holy word of God. But I have sworn a vow: I will not let anger become my adviser. I will not turn revenge into policy. I will continue to believe.

And here is my faith: any future agreement will be based on territorial compromise - not just a real estate deal, but a spiritual decision by peoples that have decided to accept one another despite years of hostility.... Therefore the first compromise is between me and my dream. I compromise with my dream of returning to Hebron in order that I may live free in the new Israel. And my Palestinian brother must give up his dream of returning to Jaffa in order to live an honourable life in Nablus. Only those capable of compromising with their dreams can sit together to forge a compromise on behalf of their nations.

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There is an ancient story about the sage who could answer every question. One of his students decided to stump him. The student caught a butterfly and held it in his fist. He came to the sage and asked: "What is in my hand - a live butterfly or a dead one?" He was thinking, if he guesses a live one, I will crush it, and if he guesses a dead one, I will open my hand and let the butterfly show the world the sage's failure. But the wise man looked him in the eye and said: "It is all in your hands."

Shortly before his death, Edward Said noted that only the work of people building community and respect for others, not impersonal politics and force, can solve the horror of Israel-Palestine today ("The Meaning of Rachel Corrie," *Counterpunch*, June 23, 2003, [www.counterpunch.org/said06232003.html](http://www.counterpunch.org/said06232003.html)):

No culture or civilization exists by itself; none is made up of things like individuality and enlightenment that are completely exclusive to it; and none exists without the basic human attributes of community, love, value for life and all the others.... The whole point about human diversity is that it is in the end a form of deep co-existence between very different styles of individuality and experience that can't all be reduced to one superior form....

Finally, David Grossman writes in *Haaretz*, an Israeli daily, about the message of the Israeli pilots who have announced their intent not to fly missions into Palestine ("Listen to the Pilots," October 8, 2003, [www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/347523.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/347523.html)). He identifies a hope that the courage of their act of civil disobedience may bring insight to a society that is blind to the terrible consequences of the violence done in their names:

It seems that the more difficult thing, the unbearably difficult thing, that the pilots have done is that, in total surprise, they have torn off most Israelis the protective layer in which they have wrapped themselves for years so as not to know or understand what is really being done in their name....

For one moment, the pilots succeeded in creating the frightening, electrifying connection between what Israel has been doing in the territories for 36 years now and the terror attacks, and for this, apparently,

it is hard to forgive them.... [W]hen Hebrew pilots, the flesh of the flesh of the Israeli consensus and the jewel in its crown, force us to look, if only for a fleeting moment, into the heart of the darkness - the first instinct is to get out of there in a panic, patch up the rent that has been torn in the sophisticated flak jacket that protects us from the knowledge and understanding, and immediately - as we were taught in the IDF - to attack and fight back, this time against the pilots.

**Where, then, is our Peace Testimony leading NYYM Friends now? How do we discern this leading in our monthly meetings? What are our responsibilities in these times?**

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Three NYYM Worship and Action for Peace Retreat Gatherings will take place in the coming weeks on the question, "Where is our peace testimony leading New York Yearly Meeting Friends now?": October 31 - November 2 at Powell House, October 31 - November 1 at the Rotary Sunshine Camp near Rochester, NY, and in New Jersey, November 14 - 15 at Rahway & Plainfield Meeting House. Detailed information, registration forms and driving directions are available on the NYYM Web site, [www.nyyym.org](http://www.nyyym.org).

Peaceable greetings,

Linda Chidsey, Vicki Cooley, and Fred Dettmer  
NYYM Worship and Action working group

My reaction to some of this, to Rachel's death, and to starting to know what's going on here, is to read a book by Desmond Tutu, and start to learn about what happened in South Africa, and so, you know, everybody talks about peace and justice but so many people think that justice involves killing somebody, to be kind of sarcastic about it. That's such a poor model for me. But in South Africa, they talked about restorative justice and trying to put the fabric of society back together and even acknowledging the loss that you had. That's a much better model. But the first thing you have to do is find out what went on and then you have to take ownership of it. There's ownership for all of us. My tax dollars went to pay for the bulldozer that ran over my daughter, and before that happened I was not protesting. So we all have some role in what goes on here and we all have to acknowledge that. But after that acknowledgment then we have to find forgiveness in some fashion and forgiveness doesn't mean that it's all right, it's just a way of bringing healing; we're still trying to learn about that.

*Craig Corrie, from press conference of Cindy and Craig Corrie, parents of Rachel Corrie, Jerusalem, September 29, 2003 (available from the Portland Independent Media Center at <http://portland.indymedia.org/en/2003/10/272700.shtml>)*

Our 450 years of commitment to Jesus' love for enemies finds its kairos in these ... terrifying decades.... Now is the time to risk everything for our belief that Jesus is the way to peace. If we still believe it, now is the time to live what we have spoken.

To rise to this challenge of history, we need to do three things: 1) we need to reject the ways we have misunderstood or weakened Jesus' call to be peacemakers; 2) we need to embrace the full biblical understanding of shalom; 3) and we need to prepare to die by the thousands....

Too often we fall into an isolationist pacifism.... Mahatma Gandhi once said that if the only two choices are to kill or to stand quietly by doing nothing while the weak are oppressed and killed, then, of course, we must kill. I agree. But there is always a third option. We can always prayerfully and nonviolently place ourselves between the weak and the oppressor. Do we have the courage to move from the back lines of isolationist pacifism to the front lines of nonviolent peacemaking?

... If pacifism is not God's will for all Christians, then it is not God's will for any.... Do we have the courage to summon the entire church to forsake the way of violence?

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Do we have the courage as a united reconciling people to show the poor of the earth our peace witness is not a subtle support for an unjust status quo, but rather a commitment to risk danger and death so that justice and peace may embrace?

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Repeatedly in our history, the terror of persecution and the temptation of security have lured us to retreat to the safety of isolated solitude where our radical ideas threaten no one. But that was not Jesus' way. He challenged his society so vigorously and so forcefully that the authorities had only two choices. They had to accept his call to repentance and change or they had to get rid of him. Do we have the courage to follow in his steps?

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Only if people see a reconciled people in our homes and our congregations will they be able to hear our invitation to forsake the way of retaliation and violence. If I am not allowing the Holy Spirit to heal the brokenness in my relationship with my spouse, I have little right to speak to my president about international reconciliation. If our Mennonite and Brethren in Christ congregations are not becoming truly reconciled communities, it is a tragic hypocrisy for us to try to tell secular governments how to overcome international hostility....

On the other hand, living models impact history. Even small groups of people practicing what they preach, laying down their lives for what they believe, influence society all out of proportion to their numbers....

We must take up our cross and follow Jesus to Golgotha. We must be prepared to die by the thousands. Those who have believed in peace through the sword have not hesitated to die.... Why do we pacifists think that our way - Jesus' way - to peace will be less costly? ... Making peace is as costly as waging war. Unless we are prepared to pay the cost of peacemaking, we have no right to claim the label or preach the message.

*From address by Ronald J. Sider at the Mennonite World Conference in Strasbourg, France, Summer 1984, out of which grew the Christian Peacemakers Teams. (The address is available online at [www.cpt.org/publications/sider.php](http://www.cpt.org/publications/sider.php).)*