



FORTY-THREE

OXFORD FRIENDS' MEETING
43 ST. GILES OXFORD OX1 3LW

NEWSLETTER

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The Palestinian People of Gaza Remembered

At this time – just a year ago – we followed news, day by day, of the terrible Israeli reprisal attack on Palestinians in Gaza. The deliberate destruction of their industrial, governmental and welfare infrastructure has been recorded in horrifying detail by the UN's Goldstone Report (www.goldstonereport.org). I urge Friends to read this report themselves. It is objective and fair – though, predictably, Israel and the US now seek to deny its conclusion that many war crimes were committed.

A Friend from the Ramallah Meeting, Jean Zaru, has told us in *The Friend* (20 November 2009) that the situation in the Occupied West Bank “was never as difficult as it is now”. Alas, we can only imagine what it is like in Gaza – as the Israeli government refuses to allow entry to those wishing to assess humanitarian needs. Only recently, the Irish Foreign Affairs Minister has been turned away, as have other EU ministers before.

Nearly 1400 people, mostly civilians, lost their lives in the reprisal attack. Over 250 children were killed, and countless others were injured or mentally scarred.

What can we do? We can ask the UK government to insist that the Israeli Government allows those wishing to provide humanitarian aid to enter Gaza. We can also ask what steps our Government is

taking to persuade Israel to accept, and move towards, the formation of a two-state solution.

More than this, we can make donations to Unipal – a charity started by a Friend – which has maintained

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From *Quaker Faith and Practice*

In the Life

My piece was pat and all ready to say,
She rose first. I threw my piece away.
My well-turned stuff
Was not so rough
As hers, but easy elegant and smooth.
Beginning middle end
It had and point
And aptly quoted prophet priest and poet.
Hers was uncouth
Wanting in art
Laboured scarce-audible and out of joint.
Three times she lost the thread
And sitting left her message half unsaid.
'Why then did thee throw it
Into the discard?'
Friend,
It had head
(Like this). Hers oh had heart.

QF&P 2.65 Robert Hewison, 1965

Deadline for contributions to the February 2010 issue: noon, Friday 22 January

Contributions, of 500 words or fewer, would be appreciated, preferably by email: newsletter@oxfordquakers.org. Paper copy can be left in the Forty-Three pigeonhole at Oxford Meeting House. For information: tel. 01865 557373.

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its presence in the Occupied Territories and refugee camps for almost 40 years. It forms a valuable bridge between young Palestinians and young people from these islands. The latter go out as volunteers to teach English in Palestinian schools, while Palestinian teachers and nurses are brought here to attend courses.

Unipal's contact details can be found on www.unipal.org.uk. You will also see that Amazon makes a donation directly to Unipal if you log-on to Amazon via Unipal's website, when you buy something from them. (Many other companies are now participating in this arrangement – see website).

Richard Phillips

A triptych by **Jill Green**, entitled 'Grief is the same', was on the inside front cover of the Judaism issue of *The Friend* (27 November 2009).



Spiritual Renewal

Ready from Within – The spiritual dimension of social action is an upcoming participatory learning process. It looks at how the teachings of Quakers and Buddhists help to sustain energy and inspiration for social action. Places are open to those engaged in helping, caring, campaigning and community organizing on a paid or unpaid basis.

The focus will be on:

- the spiritual basis of compassionate action in both traditions
- an exploration of hope and despair
- emotional awareness
- ways to focus, quieten and rest the mind
- building confidence and strength in our capacity to act

The process includes two retreats:

- a residential weekend retreat Friday 12 – Sunday 14 February 2010 Braziers Park, Ipsden, Wallingford, Oxfordshire
- a day retreat Saturday 13 March 2010 Charlbury Friends Meeting House, Oxfordshire

Between these dates, participants will be taking part in a "retreat in their daily life" where they will commit to reflection, new or renewed practices, journaling and support for at least one other person.

There will also be an online learning and sharing space, and mentoring from course leaders. Participants will be asked to commit to the whole process. For twelve people living in Oxfordshire, practising with Quakers or Buddhists, there are fully funded places. There are eight other places which cost £200 open to anyone in the UK.

The course leaders are Maitrisara (secretary of the Network of Engaged Buddhists, a group who explore the connection between the transformation of self and world) and Alex Wildwood (a Quaker who embraces Buddhist insights in his ecological activism).

Food will be vegetarian. Travel is for example by train to Reading and then regular bus service to a point half a mile from Braziers. Accommodation is in twin rooms with a few singles for those who really need them. Application forms and more information is available from: Maitrisara@tiscali.co.uk.

Thanks to **Alan Allport**



Introducing Members and Attenders of Oxford Meeting



Julian Armitstead, talking to Tanya Garland

The events that have made me who I am? The trouble being, I am not sure who I am – yet! My first thought would be that I am 'a work in progress'. Having said that, there is a theme of slight dislocation running through my life since being brought up in Africa, sent to boarding school in England and living my life since, moving from place to place. Oxford risks being one of the longest stays, since my wife is a vicar in Littlemore and my kids are very happily established in their school in Wheatley.

My very first Quaker Meeting was as a boy in Nigeria where the father of my best friend held

Quaker Meetings in his sitting room. I remember tiptoeing around from one side of the house to the other and seeing them holding hands as they sat in silence. I thought how peculiar that was.

My first adult encounter with a Quaker Meeting was in Hong Kong, where my wife and I went to work as teachers. This was by way of being a *via negativa*, by which I mean, in order to find the way one needs to go, one often needs to find the way one cannot. We had tried many churches within the Christian fold and gone to everything available. In the end we wanted somewhere to meet people in silence in the context of worship. The Quaker Meeting was advertised in the *South China Morning Post* and after going to one meeting in the upper room of the cathedral annexe, we stayed as Attenders for the next five years. I would say the HK Meeting altered the context of our lives for that time and when we came back to England in 1996, I continued to attend in Aylesbury on a regular basis. I was even treasurer for a while, though my wife Margreet started off in a new direction – to train as a priest in the C of E. She’s always had a calling but it was in HK that we discerned it together.

My attraction to Quakers is partly my attraction towards an apophatic approach to Faith – of not speaking. That is to say, it can be better to say nothing about what God is, than to make the mistake of insisting on formulae. I have always felt that, ever since an experience standing beneath



a very large mahogany tree in our garden in Nigeria. I was about six and it was something to do with the immensity of the tree and the sound of the wind in its branches and the squat black vultures, which used to live there. I remember one morning under the tree, having this absolute conviction that I loved God. I think thereafter, amidst the dislocation of my life, including the trauma of arriving in boarding school, the notion of God as a parent was of great comfort for me. My acute anxiety of being away from home turned me into a very privately pious little boy. I had constant worries, which I addressed to God. Worries about being bullied, worries about getting into trouble, worries about losing things!

I was there from the age of eight until I was eighteen. It was a very good education but I

wouldn’t have been happy in any school. I’m not good at institutions. Bedales was a progressive, secular school and very influenced, I believe, by secular Jews, Quakers and Victorian Socialists. In theory it was a very egalitarian school where we called staff by their first names, wore no uniform and where there was no corporal punishment. But in practice many found it a very stratified society where everyone was keenly aware of each other’s social status within the community. I continue to have very mixed feelings about it. For one thing, I became very right wing in my political understanding, which is something I’ve had to revise. But it’s also possible that my private religiosity was part of a rebellion against the privileged, secular, socialism that I failed to understand. After Bedales I went to Cambridge to read Classics.

What I hadn’t realised properly up to that point, was that I was prone to depression. This coloured my perception of my schooling and threatened to colour my time at university. I became very melancholic. At the beginning of the second year, I had an acute attack of depression, which was accompanied by a profound sense of failure. Although these attacks were not chronic, they were periodic and inescapable. I remember the ‘God of my childhood’ coming to me and asking me for a demonstration of my unambiguous belief. It wasn’t to be a negotiated settlement. What was required of me was an unambiguous ‘Yes’, an end to the collected cynicism that I often used to protect myself with in any public conversation about faith, which often seemed to me another way of being vulnerable, as well as being a moral strait-jacket. My reluctance to give way, and my urgent need to do so, felt like a conversation between two different kinds of voices in my head. One of them sought to protect me by insisting that I kept my options open; the other sought to save me by convincing me that these options were in fact illusory, and a function of pride. It was either Yes or No. I realise, describing it now, it makes me sound like ‘Everyman’ in a morality play. But I decided to say Yes. Within the time it took to go to bed and wake up the following morning, I felt my depression lifted and with it, my sense of failure.

For the following months, and to some extent the next few years, I experienced a continuing sense of freedom and exhilaration. Freedom from the past, and my sense of abiding failure (though I never

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stopped failing!) and exhilaration about the future. It involved love absolutely and a rediscovery of my early love for God. It also coincided with my developing passion for the theatre and what I hoped might be a vocation as an actor.

This led me to drama school. After I graduated I struggled as an actor until my late twenties. However, being six foot six inches meant that it was not easy getting parts as an actor and I redefined my passion for the theatre in terms of writing. I'm now a playwright. This process of writing has taken many years and developed alongside a twenty-year career as a schoolteacher of English, Drama, Latin and all subjects in between. I've resigned several times along the way, in order to be a full-time writer – first when I left Hong Kong, then from Cherwell, and today from Cheney!



I've recently enjoyed some success with a play around restorative justice called *After the Accident*, which last year won the Amnesty 'Protect the Human Award' and was commissioned with the BBC as a Radio 4 Friday night play. Recognition has been hard won. In the past I spent a lot of time fruitlessly worrying about writing for a living, instead of writing to explore the things I care about, without prospect of financial reward. In fact this was my breakthrough, five years ago, when I gave up all hope of ever getting anywhere, and just knew I had to write. It was soon after we moved to Oxford, and I'd taken on a maternity cover, teaching English at Cherwell. When those two terms came to an end, rather than applying for a new job, (and I was offered several), I decided to stay at home and write. In the white heat of financial and existential anxiety (I still suffer from these!) I completed a play, which was subsequently produced by a small theatre in Bristol, with highly regarded director. This project led to an attachment with the Birmingham Rep. and a new project. Doors seemed at last to open. The lesson for me, after all these years, hardly needs to be spelt out. You can only really afford to write about the things you deeply care about, and this is now what I endeavour to do!

Today, I have two further projects on the go. The first is a reworking of a wonderful Greek play by Sophocles called *The Philoctetes*, which is being read in Oxford very shortly, at the Classics faculty. It's set at the time of the Trojan War (but written at the time of the Peloponnesian War, between Athens and Sparta) and is about the twin themes of woundedness and wounding, which I hope to realise in a contemporary way. My second project, which is in its very early stages of planning, is a play around the phenomenon of the Near Death Experience and the debate over consciousness. So not very ambitious at all!

In terms of individuals who have influenced me, I'd have to mention my mother, though in recalling her significance upon my life, I'm reminded of Chairman Mao's famous dictum about the French Revolution: 'It's too early to tell'. I feel my mother's influence on me is still unfolding. She died from breast cancer over twenty years ago when I was 25. She spent the four years after her final prognosis as a searcher after spiritual truth. Incidentally, in the collection of books she bequeathed to me, there was a copy of *Quaker Faith and Practice* though she was not a Quaker. I owe to my mother not just my depressive temperament but also a sense of continuing quest, though her own quest was closed down by her health and circumstances. She too was passionate about drama and she took us to the theatre at every possible occasion. When we came back from Nigeria, we lived within easy reach of the Gardener Arts Centre at Sussex University, where theatre tended to be experimental, but we also went to the Theatre Royal in Brighton, and every summer to the Chichester Festival Theatre. My mother had studied at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London, having turned down an offer to read French at Oxford. After she died we found a box containing all the programmes of the plays she'd been to, original productions at the Royal Court including *Look back in Anger* – with her notes about the new writer John Osborne scribbled in the margin of her programme. Like me, she was a real theatre junkie. So in many respects, I feel I'm able to continue along a parallel path to hers, which I like to think she enjoys vicariously, in another place.