

Journey to Sakartvelo

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The Wider Quaker Fellowship

La Asociación de amigos de los Amigos

INTRODUCTION

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greta Mickey serves New York Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends as Peace Concerns Coordinator. She is a National Council member for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, USA branch, and Alternatives to Violence Program facilitator. Greta is also a trained facilitator in Community Dispute Resolution. She lives in the village of Dundee in New York State, USA. She has three daughters.

ABOUT SAKARTVELO (GEORGIA)

Georgia is a small country (approximately the same size and population as South Carolina in the U.S.A.), surrounded by significantly larger countries. Ukraine borders on the west, Turkey and Azerbaijan on the east, Russia on the North at the Caucasus Mountains, and the Black Sea forms her southern border. She was first called "Georgia" by the Greeks; many think because of her agrarian society. Her people continue to call her by her ancient name, Sakartvelo (pronounced "sah-khart-VEL-lo").

Cover photo: the Sakartvelo team—Natalie, the interpreter; Maia, and Greta

At the outbreak of hostilities between Russia and the Republic of Georgia in August, 2008, the General Secretary and Assistant Clerk of New York Yearly Meeting sent a letter of support to Tbilisi Friends Worship Group. These Friends were grateful for our offer of support. They promptly requested the Yearly Meeting's help with refugee aid and in bringing conflict transformation skills to their country, which had been torn by war since its birth about 300 BC. The six Friends in the Worship Group had stepped in faith into the work of helping to care for 62,000 refugees from South Ossetia and Abkhazia, many of whom were living in refugee centers lacking the bare necessities of food, hygiene products, diapers, and so on.

The worship group's current space was in the home of the meeting's clerk, Misha, a small fifth floor walk-up apartment. This was very difficult for older members. Because of the overwhelming poverty and 80% unemployment in the country, there is a great deal of crime; Misha's apartment had been broken into once, and the meeting was not comfortable inviting new attendees into his home. Some funds were made available from Friends in the UK and from New York Yearly Meeting to rent an apartment for Quaker worship and other programs that the Worship Group planned to offer.

THURSDAY, MAY 20, 2010: SAKARTVELO

The journey to Sakartvelo has been both a blessing and filled with continued challenges. After delays leaving the airport in Syracuse, holding patterns over the airport in New York, an hour's delay in the flight to Istanbul and finally, lost bags, we arrived in Tbilisi. Shirley Way and I were met at the airport by Misha (member of Tbilisi Friends Worship Group and former clerk) and Maia (the Alternatives to Violence Program or AVP

facilitator that Shirley and I will be working with here in Tbilisi). What a warm welcome! We spent a couple of hours planning workshops and settling into the flat where we will be staying during our five-week sojourn. Many members of the Worship Group hope to become AVP facilitators, so they will be part of our first workshop. Others, including some members of the refugee communities, one of Maia's daughters, and possibly Kety's sister (Kety translated our manual and lives in Florida) are hoping to become facilitators as well. We will meet with members of the worship group on Sunday before meeting for worship (6:00 pm) to talk about workshops. I am very excited about seeing all my friends from the last trip and meeting attendees new since then. Since January 2009 the number of members approved by FWCC has doubled (now eight), while more attendees come. We will spend time this afternoon with Misha shopping for food and supplies in the major market in Tbilisi.

For me, despite the challenges of the trip, I feel buoyed up and carried forward on a current of pure and Holy energy. I am clear that that energy is a response of Spirit generated by all who hold Shirley and me and our work in Sakartvelo in the Light: in prayer.

As I traveled yesterday I found myself amazed at the level of courage that learning to trust in God (a continuing process) has brought me. I am such a new AVP facilitator that, even with Shirley (a very experienced facilitator) at my side, there is some wonderment that I am called to this work, and yet the Call seems clear—it has been tested again and again. There is trembling within. My only response is consistently to turn it over to God. My constant prayer: Let my words be Thy Words. Let my will be Thy Will. Help me to be your Love.

MONDAY, MAY 24, 2010

The last couple of days have been filled with preparations. We've been to market to buy food and supplies for our AVP

participants. Yesterday Shirley, Maia and I met with two former AVP facilitators that Maia knows. Both were shocked by the thought of facilitating an AVP workshop without receiving a stipend. We shared our understanding that AVP is a volunteer program for both facilitators and participants, explaining why it is important to maintain equality. We lifted up our own experiences that when the work comes from a place of love for and belief in the work and those we are working with, it is very different than when it is driven by a need or desire for money. I don't know if these two women will return.

Natalie, our interpreter, seems very excited and enthusiastic not only to be working with us but about our process. Tomorrow we begin. Our first workshop, with 10 participants, will take place in our flat, running from 11:00 am to 7:00 pm for the next three days with facilitators beginning a half hour earlier and staying a half hour later. The first workshop will be in Russian, with the remaining four in Georgian. The second workshop will be all female, with refugees. Then we'll do a training for facilitators (T for F) followed by two more workshops, one with refugees and another with orphans.

Shirley and I share the flat, which has one main room approximately 12' x 20' with a tiny kitchen and bathroom attached. We are doing an intricate dance of learning to be in this very small space together, not an easy thing for two strong-willed women who are used to living alone. Our peacemaking skills are being tested.

THURSDAY, MAY 27, 2010

Maia and Shirley and I have just completed the first AVP workshop to take place in the Republic of Georgia in more than eight years. This was a mixed-gender workshop which, in this culture, proved to be very difficult. The woman's role is to take care of her husband and her children and to be obedient. There

were a couple of men in the workshop who were very gracious and courtly in their behavior and also, without realizing it, quite belittling. I feel that I need to provide balance between one facilitator who immediately falls into the Georgian woman's role and another who is a strong feminist and would like to see this change NOW. I think that sometimes it is hard, when we want something so badly for someone else, to accept that they are the ones who must determine what is right and wrong for themselves. They are the ones who must want the change before they can move toward change. Nonetheless, we do have several good prospects in this group to invite to be trained as AVP facilitators.

Things in Sakartvelo have changed for the better since my last visit in the winter of 2009. I can see that some buildings have been painted and some roads paved. The parking lot at the airport no longer has gaping holes. In some places I can see and hear new construction. At the same time some of the big buildings that were started ground to a halt during the financial crisis. Many of those have not recommenced building since there are no more funds available. On my last visit here I was warned not to go out alone. Now, it feels safe to walk on the street alone during the day, although we have been told that we should not go out at night, even together. It is so clear that we are not from Sakartvelo! Women here almost always wear black slacks or black skirt, never blue jeans. Their blouses are usually dark colors with a sweater on even when it's really too warm for one. Men seem much freer to wear whatever colors they please! Our skin is fairer and we are taller so it's really very easy to pick us out in the crowd.

Tomorrow we will go sightseeing with Misha and Maia as well as trying to accomplish all of the household things that have been left undone. We'll buy a washbasin on the way home from the internet cafe so that we can wash our clothes, do some cleaning, and try to prepare for our next workshop, which will

begin on Tuesday or Wednesday with an organization of refugee women. We are very much looking forward to working with them.

SUNDAY, MAY 30, 2010

Almost two weeks of our five-week stay here are done. Today we did some sightseeing in eastern Sakartvelo. It's a very beautiful part of the country that I had not seen before. The Georgians call it desert because it is very dry in the months of July, August and September, but right now it is lush and green rolling pastureland. There are no fences; large herds of sheep and cattle roam free over the land. I asked who owned the land and found that it is owned by the government, so everyone is free to use it. The end of our journey took us to David Gareja Monastery which was started in the third century. It is very close to Georgia's border with Armenia. It has been attacked, burned and rebuilt several times—Turks, Mongols, the Soviets. Today this incredible monastery, carved into the rock, is once again inhabited by Georgian Orthodox monks.

Tomorrow, Sunday, is the first democratic election of the mayor of Tbilisi, and there is much excitement. The last week has seen pamphletting on the sidewalks as we normally see in the US. Misha is a member of a political party and so has committed to working at the polls, so we will not see him tomorrow.

A thunder and lightning storm is starting and likely to take out our electricity. Utilities in Tbilisi are rather tentative at best. In our flat we never have water between 3:00 pm and 6:00 pm.

FRIDAY, JUNE 4, 2010

It's Friday morning and we have the weekend off! Yesterday evening we completed our second AVP Georgia workshop with a group of Abkhazian IDPs (internally displaced persons) who have been in Sakartvelo since the first conflict about twenty years ago. Many of them are students. They were bright and enthusiastic!

Many of them will be part of our training for facilitators which will begin on Monday. We expect to have about fifteen in that workshop. From here on an AVP marathon begins. After the T for F we will spend Saturday and Sunday (12th and 13th) working with youth in an orphanage in the mountains. For two days, in the mornings we will do a mini-workshop with youth ages 10–13, and in the afternoons another mini-workshop with youth 14–18. On Monday the 14th we will begin a full three-day workshop with members of the orphanage staff. Following that we will do a workshop with South Ossetian refugees from the 2008 conflict, ending on the 20th. Our flight home is in the wee hours of the morning on June 22nd.

In the midst of all our work, our hosts are determined that we will see Sakartvelo and have an opportunity to experience their culture and customs. So today and tomorrow Misha and Maia will pick us up to go on “excursions.” I am grateful for their attentiveness and for the wonderful Georgian tradition of hospitality!

As we move through these days filled with hustle and bustle I have been called to more and more time in silent prayer. That deep listening—opening to Spirit—helps me to know my Center and remain grounded. I am reminded of Brother Lawrence, who spoke of the practice of the presence of God—an understanding that we can be just as close to God while peeling potatoes in the kitchen as we can be in our places of worship. We have only the present moment. I find that I slow myself down just a bit as I begin to rush through preparations, to be aware of Spirit in the midst and to give thanks for that moment. When I am able to do this I find my days filled with Light and Joy.

SUNDAY, JUNE 6, 2010

The last few days have been a rush of sightseeing as our Georgian hosts try to make sure that we see as much of Georgia

as we can in the minimal amount of free time that we have left. On Friday we headed to the Cave City of Vardzia in the Meskhet-Javahet region. The Cave City was begun as a monastery and is dug into the side of the Erusheli mountain in southern Georgia near Aspindza. It was founded by Queen Tamar in 1185. The monastery and complex was constructed as protection from the Mongols and at its height consisted of over six thousand apartments in thirteen stories. The city included a church, a throne room, and a complex irrigation system watering terraced farmlands. The only access was through some well-hidden tunnels near the Mtkvari river. An earthquake in Samtskhe destroyed approximately two thirds of the city in 1283, exposing the caves to outside view and collapsing the irrigation system. Today about three hundred apartments and halls may still be visited. The site is maintained by a small group of monks.

Our route took us through Borjomi, a famous resort town with hot springs. We stopped to fill bottles with this precious water which we were exhorted to drink. Both Shirley and I tried it—extremely salty with a touch of sulfur. A taste was about as far as we got. Then we were on the road to Svaneti. Borjomi is about a two-hour drive west of Tbilisi with Svaneti about another hour and a half to the south. On the way we wound through beautiful mountain passes with hanging footbridges over a fast-moving river—the only connection for the inhabitants of mountain towns to any form of modern transportation. About halfway to Svaneti we came upon a stretch of fresh asphalt and pebbles. It was so hot that the asphalt had melted. Pebbles and asphalt became lodged inside the wheels of Misha’s car, forcing us to turn back. Because we now had extra time we stopped at a traditional Georgian restaurant. We had a wonderful spicy black bean soup with a local variety of corn bread, followed by yet another variety of cachapuri (bread with a tasty cheese filling—each region has its own variety) and kingali

(a dough stuffed with a delicious meat filling and boiled—looks like an inverted mushroom). Shirley tried the local beer while I stuck with mineral water. We remarked that the bottled water tastes very different from the water at Borjomi! From there we headed back to the flat for a night's rest.

Misha picked us up the next day (Saturday) at 11:45 and we were joined by Vova (the current clerk of Tbilisi Friends Worship Group) for a day of exploring old Tbilisi. We viewed the hot springs that caused King Vakhtang Gorgasali to move his capital here from Mtskheta in the middle of the fifth century, and roamed the streets of the old city, stopping briefly to listen to the chant at a Georgian Orthodox church service and to marvel at the beautiful handwoven locally made rugs in a shop.

The weather here is unseasonably warm, in the upper 80s to upper 90s Fahrenheit, instead of the usual upper 60s and lower 70s.

Today we begin team-building for our Training for Facilitators workshop. The predominantly young people who are anxious to become facilitators are so full of hope for their country and anxious to be part of moving to a new way of thinking and being and away from the violence that is so prevalent in this culture. It fills me with hope and reinforces my belief that world peace is possible.

THURSDAY, JUNE 10, 2010

Yesterday we completed a training for facilitators workshop and graduated thirteen people who are excited and anxious to bring AVP to their countrymen. This weekend we will begin working with some of them as apprentices. AVP was active here in the late seventies when a UN employee was paid to bring the program to Sakartvelo. She acted in the capacity of coordinator, trainer, and lead facilitator. She had UN money available and used it, in part, to pay stipends to AVP facilitators. When she

and the UN program left Sakartvelo, AVP stopped. Today all but one of the facilitators from those times still refuse to work without pay, so our work is to raise up a cadre of volunteer facilitators to breathe new life into AVP here.

Sakartvelo is steeped in violence. As a tiny nation (about the size of South Carolina) wedged in between many larger countries, she has been invaded innumerable times in her history and still managed to retain territory, but only through fierce fighting. Her culture is pervaded with violence of all kinds. The work of AVP is so needed here!

These last weeks, in the few free moments that we have, I find myself rather amazed to be carrying this work. I remember when I was first asked to take over the correspondence with Tbilisi Friends Worship Group, to listen to their requests and discern how to move forward; my first inclination was to say “no.” I hadn't had any experience in such things and wasn't clear that I had the skills or knowledge to proceed, but I stopped and took the time to pray for guidance. In my inner silence I heard a very clear voice with a very clear message: “Just do it!” so I stepped into the work in faith, believing that if I continued to listen, to be faithful, way would open. I am amazed by the good work that is being accomplished.

I remember receiving a message one Christmas morning in meeting for worship. It was the revelation that Mary said “Yes.” She didn't have to. She knew that it would change her life completely and probably knew that it would be challenging and put her in painful places, but she said “Yes.” The message for me is clear. Each time that I open to the Spirit, each time that I say “Yes,” knowing that the path will be challenging and that it may put me in painful places, it makes the next time that much easier. I know that God walks beside me and will not abandon me. Thanks be to God!

SUNDAY, JUNE 13, 2010

We've just finished two two-day mini workshops at Tskneti orphanage. We worked with two teams of apprentice facilitators. They met and exceeded our hopes and expectations. The workshops themselves were difficult. We were expecting that our morning group of children would be 10–13 years of age and the afternoon group 14–18 years old. I think we had younger ones in both groups. The first day was extremely challenging with a great deal of disruptive behavior. The second day was a huge improvement. We had already been told by officials at the ministry that oversees orphanages (this particular ministry has existed for only five months!) that their ombudsman had reported finding instances of abuse happening, so we were not completely surprised by the children's behaviors. Nonetheless, as we left today, we had a sense of hopefulness, a sense that we had planted seeds of change—of another way. For me, the work of peacemaking is often about the planting of seeds.

THURSDAY, JUNE 17, 2010

It's Thursday in Tbilisi, finally a day off for Shirley and me. On Monday we began a full AVP workshop for teachers and staff at the Tskneti orphanage. This group was all women. Several had worked at the orphanage for more than twenty years. Aside from a seminar here and there none had received any specific training in working with the children. They seemed clear that while they love the children and do their very best, the children need much more than they have to give. The workshop was wonderful, full of open spirits, laughter and tears. As we parted there were hugs and thank-yous from both participants and facilitators. As we did our final evaluation, our participants talked about the new skills that they had found within themselves and how they were already starting to put them to use in their lives and in their work with the children.

Tomorrow we begin our final workshop with the South Ossetian refugees. These refugees still live in refugee housing provided by the Government of Georgia. In this instance it is an abandoned school building in the middle of Tbilisi, only a couple of blocks from the flat that Shirley and I are staying in. The building is in quite a state of disrepair. One of the women living there will host the workshop in her room. I suspect that the small space will be challenging. We expect to find the trauma of war in this group, so we are doing our best to prepare ourselves and our apprentice facilitators for that eventuality.

I find my thoughts beginning to wander home. At the same time, there is sadness as I think of leaving Sakartvelo. There is a Spirit here of welcome and love and joy, even in the midst of severe poverty and oppression, that calls out to me. There is a longing for Peace. I know in my heart that the work of peacemaking is needed in all corners of the world, including my tiny hometown in New York. Society talks about doing “random acts of kindness.” I believe that we who choose the path of Peace are called rather to the more radical “conscious acts of Love.” For Love is the only power strong enough to overcome evil and to lead us to peace.

MONDAY, JUNE 21, 2010

Yesterday we finished our last AVP workshop, with the Ossetian refugees. Many times during this workshop we paused as they shared their stories: stories of being bombed, of leaving their homes with only their clothes, of two elderly sisters walking 80 kilometers to reach safety, of families separated and some still not rejoined. Hearing these narratives made it even more poignant that each and every one had joy to share; each one was full of warmth and love. I feel so clear that this is the true state of the human spirit. It is what we are all called to reach out to in one another.

Over the last five weeks I have seen over and over again

how important the work of AVP is. Within each group, I have heard stories of how transforming power has begun to change participants' lives, even within the three days that we spent with them. We leave behind twelve apprentice facilitators (three men and nine women) who are bright and enthusiastic and who, we believe, have grasped an understanding of what we name as transforming power. So AVP Georgia is reborn. She will need to be nurtured. Maia is a long-time facilitator, but she is not clear that she has the skills to train new facilitators, so a Training for Trainers workshop will need to happen here. But the work has begun and, even as we prepare to leave, it bears fruit. Nothing touches my soul more deeply.

Last night we shared our last meeting for worship with Tbilisi Friends Worship Group. At the end, there was a bottle of wine and the traditional Georgian toasting (Tamada). Shirley and I were toasted in traditional fashion and I returned a toast, thanking them for all that they have done to support us and the work of AVP in Georgia and for their deep caring for others. They endorsed our travel minutes in English, Russian, and Georgian.

Sakartvelo is a land that prides itself on its hospitality, and with good reason. Everyone has been so helpful and welcoming. The street vendors that we buy most of our food from have gotten to know us and are quite good at guessing what we want. I've taken to keeping paper and pen in my pocket so that I can draw pictures of what I hope to buy. Between the pictures and pantomime we manage to figure it out. The women in our local shop seem awed when I ask for 6 kilos of Samarkho cookies. (We find that many who practice the orthodox faith fast a great deal of the time and so eat no meat, fish, eggs or milk products; "Samarkho" is fasting.) Often they will have a few English words with which they try to guess why we're here. I've been unable to explain to them that I'm buying for workshops or to share with them that we're leaving today.

This morning is filled with packing—bags of gifts from the worship group as well as a souvenir or two of my own. We'll clean the flat and return it to its original configuration. There are the final meetings to be had, an hour or two of sleep, and then off to the airport at 1:30am. I am longing for my own bed, but at the same time there is a tug in my heart and tears in my eyes as we prepare to leave this country and people that I have come to love.

FRIDAY, JULY 2, 2010

Now begins the time for deep reflection. The work in Sakartvelo feels new and fresh; seasoning is required even as the work continues.

In a meeting at the Department of the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation of Georgia I mentioned my personal leading of working toward world peace. One woman looked at me and said that she thought that was a wonderful goal but that everyone thinks that peace is something different. She is right. There are many perceptions of peace. The most common is perhaps that it is the absence of war.

Vova, the Worship Group clerk, is an avid reader and deep thinker. I had a conversation with him in which he posited that the making of war is considered a science; books are written about making war, weaponry and planning strategy. His query was, isn't peacemaking a science also? It was a good and thoughtful question, but I couldn't agree. For me, the work of peacemaking is the work of the heart and soul; inextricably linked with my connection with Spirit. I believe that we must begin the work of peacemaking by undertaking our own individual quest for Peace, searching for "that of God within". Without having begun the work within ourselves, we lack the moral compass and integrity to ask others to follow that path.

From the beginning of this work in Sakartvelo I have been so touched by Tbilisi Friends Worship Group, a small gathering

of Quaker members and attenders who reached across the world in hope and faith to ask for help with the care of refugees and with bringing conflict transformation skills to their country. They did not shy away from the size and scope of the work that was placed before them; they were not overwhelmed by its enormity or by fear of failure. They were, and remain, faithful to the leadings of the Spirit. This kind of faithfulness is not centered in our minds or in logic. If it were, we would run away, thinking the work too hard or too difficult or too large. It finds its roots in our heart and soul, supported by the Joy that only Spirit can bring when we are faithful.

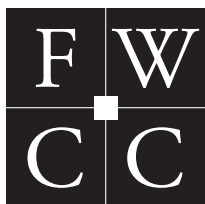
FRIDAY, JULY 16, 2010: "OLD WOMAN" ?

I recently received an affirmation that was both wonderful and thought-provoking. A young woman wrote "I want to be like you when I will be old woman." I was certainly flattered that anyone would want to be like me, although I am definitely not ready to think of myself as an old woman! I also felt the weight of responsibility to be a role model, no matter how passing. As I traveled home from Tbilisi there was plenty of time to ruminate. If I were to live to be ninety, my life would now be two-thirds over. It feels like a good time to think about where I've been and the possibilities for the next thirty years or so.

Q U E R I E S

Following are some queries about the text, which you may wish to use for reflection or study, individually or with others.

1. (June 10) Mary said "Yes": Have you ever felt a strong calling to do something difficult? Did you hesitate? If so, how did you overcome your hesitation?
 2. (June 17) Do you understand the difference between "random acts of kindness" and "conscious acts of love"? Do you agree or not agree with the author about being conscious and not random?
 3. (July 2) Is peacemaking a "science" or something else? The author says it is not a science but "the work of the heart and soul." Do you agree or disagree?
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The Fellowship was founded in 1936 by Rufus M. Jones, a North American Quaker teacher, activist and mystic, as a way for like-minded people who were interested in Quaker beliefs and practices to stay in contact with the Religious Society of Friends, while maintaining their own religious affiliation, if any. Today, WQF Fellows live in over 90 countries, and include non-Friends, inquirers, Quakers living in isolated circumstances, and active members and attenders of Friends meetings and churches. Wider Quaker Fellowship depends on the financial support of its readers to provide this service.

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