Peacemaking: Public & Private

by

Adam Curle

Adam Curle is a member of the Society of Friends. He lives with his wife, Anne, in the little village of Austwick in Yorkshire, England, where together they enjoy walking, gardening, and gathering wild plants for homemade wine. Adam is both a writer and a teacher whose work spans close to fifty years in the Third World. He began as an anthropologist, became an academic and a development practicioner, and later an intermediary in conflict situations around the world. He was the first professor of Peace Studies at Bradford University and in the last several years has met and learned from the Dalai Lama. A person of vast vision and love for human nature, he is known for his ability to listen in difficult circumstances. Closing a lecture in 1980, he reminded us that "we should, each one of us, act as though the salvation of the world were in our own hands." This lecture was originally given at Queen's University (Canada) in 1978.

I only began to study peace after having been involved in the practical work of peace-making. It came about by chance. I had lived and worked, mainly on development problems, in Asia and Africa for several years, but had no experience of politics or diplomacy, having been trained as a psychologist and anthropologist. However, since I knew the places and some of the main actors, I became involved as a mediator in wars in both continents. For several years I was absorbed in the processes of negotiation, bargaining, seeking for compromises, face-saving devices, attempts to explain enemies to each other, trade-offs and all the other methods by which a third party attempts to promote a settlement or to reduce the level of hostility. This was how I understood peace-making – the effort by an outsider to end hostilities between warring parties. This, of course, was public peace-making, not that most of what we did was not highly confidential, but because the general situation was well-known as were the procedures of diplomacy and mediation.

Before long, however, I began to see that preoccupation with war could merely distract attention from other situations that were almost as damaging. These were situations in which violence was done to people by injustice, oppression, manipulation, exploitation, by the infliction of terror, by degrading or inhuman practices and all the other count-

less ways in which we demean and harm each other, physically or psychically. Indeed these forms of violence are just as important as wars, for they are the seed bed out of which wars grow. If we were to analyse the approximately 110 wars of the last thirty years we would find that a very large proportion originated in such circumstances – in colonialism, the victimisation of a minority (or on occasion a majority) group, or exploitation for economic or strategic purposes. Once the wars begin they develop a terrible momentum and are hard to settle except by military victory, but if the right action is taken early enough the worst violence may be forestalled.

These pre-war or non-war situations cannot be tackled with the same methods as wars, at least as the wars I have been involved with. When the violence stems essentially from inequality, there is little point in negotiation and bargaining: the strong are not going to give in to the weak, to surrender the advantages they derive from their power because of anyone's persuasive tongue. They may, of course, come to feel that it would be sensible for them to make some concessions, but that is a completely different matter. Essentially the only course open to the weak is to become strong enough to change the structure of inequality. This is what was achieved by Gandhi's struggle for the independence of India and subsequently, peacefully or violently, by many colonial countries. (I should note sadly in passing that independence obtained in this way was not always absolute; often the colonial powers relinquished their political control only to impose an equally harmful, because hidden, economic stranglehold). Here one role for the peacemaker is to help empower the weak. This may be thought of as a subversive or revolutionary role, for if it is successful there will almost inevitably be a period of tur-

bulence, but this can be justified on the grounds that it is a necessary stage in the establishment of peaceful society in which justice and harmony eventually prevail. Another important task for the peacemaker is to find ways of making the change as non-violent as possible.

I would not wish to imply that all these peacemaking activities are on a large scale, involving nations or big groups. I have come to feel more and more that anyone who is seriously concerned with peace, by which I mean positive, warm, cooperative and constructive relationships between people, must be attentive to relationships between all human beings, friends, members of a family, teachers and students, doctors and patients, neighbors, and so on. Obviously the scale of a relationship to some extent determines its character – there are some elements in an international relationship which do not exist in a relationship between a wife and her husband – on the other hand, there are also some which do. The common factor is, of course, the human one. Although the structure of a relationship may have been built up over centuries, eight of them in the case of Northern Ireland, it is the men and women of today who maintain that structure. They may be born into circumstances which impose certain pressures, but however they may have been moulded it is they who make the decisions, give the orders, throw the bombs, pull the triggers. But it is also they who can talk to each other, help each other, influence each other, break the age-old pattern.

It is the structure of the relationship that is public, objective, capable of analysis in terms of social science concepts. But there is something else, an underside to these more objective peacemaking activities that I call private. It is not very easy to define. I can't even say that it is the personal as opposed to the structural or institutional. It is per-

sonal, certainly, but then it has always been acknowledged that individual peculiarities do affect larger issues; prime ministers and presidents are carried along by the momemtum of history and have less influence on events than they might like to think, but there is a significant modicum of difference between the reactions of, for example, American presidents Eisenhower, Truman, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Carter that no statesman can afford to ignore. No, I am referring to something that is more subtle. It has nothing to do with the specific situation, although this must obviously be well understood. It is not even concerned with what we call the personality of individual leaders, meaning their quirks, idiosyncrasies and peculiarities. It is concerned with the extent to which those involved in the situation are liberated from the forces that would make them see both it and themselves inaccurately.

Fairly early in my experience as a negotiator I began to be aware that the leaders who have to make momentous political and strategic decisions are not simply icy thinking machines, moved only by a logical evaluation of all factors in the situation, and coming like a chess Grand Master to the best possible conclusion. On the contrary, however able they may be, their judgement is also affected by their fears, anger, resentment, ambition, vanity and by the largely unconscious memory of long past pains, anxieties and feelings of powerlessness. Often the tenser the situation the more dominant are these feelings, and the more dominant they become the faster the flight from reason. I have sometimes had the impression that if the greatest diplomatic and military minds of history, say Alexander, Napoleon, Machiavelli, Talleyrand, Metternich with Aristotle thrown in for good measure, were to offer their solutions to the problems of Northern Ireland and the Middle East, they

would be rejected. The actors in a conflict perceive the situation unclearly through a haze of violent emotion and only when this is dispersed can they properly assess the situation. To blow away the haze is a very important part of private peacemaking. But of course the peacemaker is in very much the same situation. He carries around with him the legacy of the past and the pressures of the present, both of which interact to impair his judgement and he cannot help others to be free of this legacy until his own liberation has begun.

It is not enough, moreover, to consider only the leaders. They are very important in taking the first steps towards re-establishing peace, but the consolidation of peace as a peaceful society needs many peaceful people and peacefulness is a quality of people not driven by violent or desperate feelings. This, it seems to me, is a very important argument for seeking non-violent methods of changing cruel, or corrupt, unjust or unequal social structures. Some dedicated and intelligent people believe that we cannot affect human nature until we have altered the society that flawed it, and that we are unlikely to be able to do that without violence. But the habit of violence and the accompanying insensitivity to suffering tend to persist. Thus all too often in history, and we can think of several contemporary examples, a tyranny is over-thrown and those ardent lovers of justice who overthrew it become equally tyrannical. If it were not so, there would be many utopias in our unhappy world. There are, of course, numerous complex reasons for the difficulty in establishing ideal or even relatively decent societies, but the acceptance of violence as a means of achieving ends is certainly one of them. The ends may at first seem good, but with practice we become less discriminating.

This implies particular responsibilities for peacemakers engaged in working towards the establishment of a peaceful society. I phrase it positively instead of talking about changing or eliminating an unpeaceful one. They may indeed devise strategies of social, economic and political change: this is in the public domain of peace-making, but it will be even more important for them to help their collaborators to work on their problems of personal unpeacefulness. This is the private approach, and it is as indispensible as the public to reaching the final goal, not just the cessation of hostilities or the overthrow of a particular regime, but the establishment of a lasting peace, based on justice and nonviolence.

Our tendency to inner unpeacefulness is pervasive. At the center of all human conflicts, whatever their cause and whatever the rights and wrongs of any particular case, are our apprehension, anger, resentment, vanity, hurt pride, insecurity, prejudice, the sense of hopelessness, and above all the blurred understanding and the obscure but potent impact of old pains and fears. Even when we struggle for the most splendid cause, these things render our struggle harder and less effective.

In making this generalisation, I am not suggesting that human nature is in any fundamental sense pathological. Below the confusions that characterise so much of our lives are enormous potentials. Every so often we perceive these, unexpectedly revealed, in each other – great funds of creative ability, powers of concentration, profundity, intellectual clarity and grasp, determination, persistence, courage, love. We have all been taught to believe that to be "normal" is desirable, a synonym for healthy, but the norm is the average and our average is low – minds fettered by poor concentration, inability to exercise control over them-

selves (how many people can keep their minds empty of stray thoughts for more than 30 seconds?), and the compulsions of unconscious motives. If by normal we really mean healthy, or whole, we should not accept the standard of the average; we should aim at the best of which we are capable (perhaps Maslow's peak experience). The question of intelligence is illustrative. A number of studies have shown that intellectual performance (and test scores) can be vastly improved simply by treating people as though they could do better. But we find it convenient to classify people according to a dubious concept of intelligence, and the more we act upon it the more true does it seem to be; just as people behave stupidly, and eventually cannot do otherwise, if treated as stupid, thus proving the myth. I have, however, so often found that people are capable of infinitely more than is generally believed that in my view the real normal, what we should be like, is a thing of wonder. We are capable of being, as our experience shows, incredibly strong, diverse, understanding, sensitive, while the average is a pathetic travesty (from which come most of our miseries) of what we might be.

How is it, then, that most of us most of the time fall so far below our potential? From a very early age society impinges upon us. First we learn from our parents and then increasingly from relatives, friends, school, which things are acceptable and bring rewards, and which are in some sense punished. We become "socialised", learning how to respond to social stimuli according to the prevalent social code. We also receive through various media an enormous amount of information about the world and ourselves. Much of this is, of course, factual and accurate, but much is also distorted or untrue giving rise to those habits of mind (significant phrase) we call racism, sexism, ageism and a

limited view of our nature and potentials. We also add to our mental baggage the innumerable fears and hurts which we inevitably sustain in the process of growing up. All these feelings and attitudes are fed into that great computer, the brain, the organ through which we experience mind. There they remain, some frequently and some infrequently activated, but all ready to be triggered by the right associative stimulus.

The brain is amazingly swift, and highly efficient, except in so far as false information has been fed into the data bank. It responds almost instantaneously to any stimulus by assembling and presenting the appropriate – or what we have been conditioned to consider as appropriate – information. Just consider how much we leave to our computers. Not only do we dress, feed or wash ourselves without consciously thinking out each move, but we greet acquaintances in the street, exchange conventional enquiries and comments in a completely automatic fashion and then pass on almost without memory of the incident. I can even do something as "intellectually" complex as giving a lecture by computer. It takes over when I am speaking on a familiar theme and in a sense I can then go to sleep, just as an airman can sleep after switching on the automatic pilot, but after a while I may awake and not know what point I have reached in my talk. At such times we are what is known as absent minded. The mind is not there. While the computer works it dreams, wandering away along a train of associations that we call day dreams. There is, of course, much about us that is necessarily automatic, not only the autonomic nervous system, but the learned muscular responses enabling us to walk, talk, swim, play games, etc. etc. It is only when what should be conscious becomes automatic that malfunctioning begins.

I use the analogy of the computer advisedly because a computer is a machine and there is much that is machine-like and automatic about our behaviour. When the "mind is absent" there is no real awareness of what we are doing. This is inevitable: we are not fully conscious.

Some of the elements in the computer which contribute to the diminution of consciousness are also those which tend to make automatic behaviour damaging or violent. I am speaking of these complexes of fixed ideas about people and society that I would collectively call isms, and of memory traces of fear, rejection, loneliness and other painful feelings. Often the isms and the feelings of pain interact: we seek refuge from pain in the false security of an ism that boosts our self-esteem, and so act in a way that pains others – and may thus indirectly contribute to our own hurt. In countless ways our response to pain, especially the pain whose origin and nature are hidden from us, is destructive. We protect ourselves from future hurts, or shield our fragile identity (itself a protective device) by manipulating or dominating others, by pestering them for attention, by assuming artificial or unnatural roles, by trying to demonstrate our superiority, by hurting or humiliating. Like most of what are called neurotic mechanisms these things do nothing to give more than temporary relief from the conditions that evoked them. In general they make things worse.

For most of us the moods come and go, unbidden and often unrecognised, in response to the stimulus. They may not be very important, but also they may determine a whole complex pattern of life. Whenever we find ourselves suddenly and unreasonably (as we realise later, but not at the time) irritated, resentful, alarmed, depressed, it is because something has stirred the dregs of an old hurt which has

then taken over and dimmed our consciousness. The anger that we express at that time against a particular person may well have nothing to do with the person who in all innocence merely did or said something to stir an association. The pain inflicted upon us is transmuted into anger that we direct against others, who in turn receive it as pain and pass it on as pain-giving anger to yet others and so on in an endless sprial of violence – all semi-conscious.

I should mention in parenthesis that it seems unnecessary to debate whether human beings are innately violent, killer apes as we have been termed. I do not believe that we are, and if there are any individuals or societies which are or have been completely non-violent – as I think can easily be demonstrated – we have to find another explanation for the all too prevalent violence. A wise psychiatrist, John Rickman, said that violence was the fruit of unlived life. By this graphic phrase I think he meant that violence stems from the frustration, pain, fear, anguish, desperation, sense of loss and confusion that we have all suffered, though some no doubt more than others. But life *can* be lived and we must learn to do so more fully.

If it is the common predicament of humanity to be less than half awake, to behave – often violently – like machines, to mask our high potential with misinformation, preconceptions and negative emotions, then the would-be peacemakers must work on themselves as much as or more than on those whose violence they would wish to curb, for they are also violent and violent people cannot create lastingly unviolent situations. Only by learning to control their own malfunctioning can they help others to do so, and only thus have a fully human relationship with them rather than a largely mechanical interaction.

First it is necessary to recognise how little real

autonomy we have; how much we are dominated by the flow of thoughts, memories, ideas, feelings that flicker across the screen of consciousness; how little we are capable of attention (this is an activity of the whole self as compared with absorption than can be as automatic as anything else); how, for all our vaunted free will, we cannot choose our feelings or control our thoughts. At the same time we have to recognise that this is the general human condition and that we must not castigate ourselves or forget that below the surface confusion is a deep source of strength. For all our normal lack of complete consciousness, we are not impotent.

Next, we must seek some means of becoming more and more constantly awake. This is an individual matter for each person. Let me, however, mention a few things which I believe to be of general validity. First, it is necessary to practice quietness. Our normal state is one of inner noise distracting us from reaching the inner parts of the mind. This is not difficult, if we can only remember to do it. It is only necessary to compose ourselves, sitting comfortably but not slouching, for two or three minutes two or three times a day, but preferably between different types of activity. The mind then comes to rest and intruding thoughts ignored or nudged gently aside.

During these periods and indeed as often as we can remember to do it, whatever we are engaged with, we should awake. I mean that we should become conscious of who we are, where we are, what we are doing, what is around us, and – particularly what our bodies feel like.

These things are very simple; the only difficulty is in breaking the bad habit of being asleep by the good habit of being awake. If we could be conscious of ourselves the whole time, life would be transformed including, of

course, our relationships with others.

It is particularly important to remind ourselves constantly that our essence is flawless, that we are all in that sense perfect. But at the same time we are machines. If we are to prevent the machine taking over what should be the function of mind, of consciousness, we have to understand the machine and so should observe it. Paradoxically we can sometimes get the best insight into its nature from the way in which it impedes consciousness – for example, by the difficulties we have in remembering to be quiet.

It is also very important to trace to their sources those invaders that all too often dominate our minds. These are the paralysing fears, the feelings of impotence, and destructive impulses, the desperate need for reassurance, the miseries, the oft repeated patterns of behaviour that always lead to the same sort of undesired consequences, the sense of worthlessness that arises unreasonably and unbidden. They not only make us unhappy and distort our relationships with others whom we try to maniuplate to assuage our pain, but make us much less effective than we might have been. How can we deal wisely and comprehensively with a complex situation when we are, as we significantly say, "out of our minds" with worry – or resentment, or hopelessness, or whatever it may be. The best we can do on our own is to try to maintain perspective, understanding that these invaders are unreal, that they have nothing to do with our genuine natures, or the present situation, and to try not to treat them seriously. As we become more self-conscious their origins may become clear to us, and their hold over us weaken. There are, however, certain sorts of help which may be sought. Among more accessible techniques, I am struck by the efficacy of co-counselling which identifies the sources of the dominating pains and fears

and enables us to dissolve them by discharging the emotion we originally felt, but for various reasons could not properly express.

The practice of meditation is of great help in our efforts to escape what is inappropriately automatic in our natures. Meditation is, in one sense, a journey inwards. It may be contrasted with consciousness-raising exercises which lead outward and which make us more aware of the body and surroundings. These help to stem the draining of energy in day dreams and destructive emotions but meditation leads us to the source of that energy. Again I would emphasise that this is a very personal matter, private indeed, and we must seek the help that seems most suitable and most available.

Lastly, I would suggest something very practical. It is not enough simply to recognise as a general principle that we have great untapped potentialities, but to demonstrate to ourselves that this is true. We are dominated by ideas, usually because people have told us, that we are stupid, no good, inartistic, impractical, lazy, hesitant and the like. Here are a few hints. Never waste time worrying about not having time to do something – get on and do it and you will find you have all the time in the world. If there is something you would like to do but feel you are unable to – painting, playing an instrument, driving a car, doing household repairs – just do it, and you will find you can as long as you don't think you can't. If you find yourself being overcome by the fear of failure don't dignify this erroneous belief by paying it attention, or it will overcome you: Have you ever stayed awake all night because you were afraid you were not going to be able to get to sleep? Just push the idea away without focussing on it. But beware, also, of another pitfall. When you find you can draw or play the piano or

whatever, don't get pleased with yourself. To know calmly and objectively that you have capacities is very different from claiming personal credit for them. To say: look at me, how clever I am, is as destructive as to say: how stupid I am. Our success has merely demonstrated one individual realisation of a universal potential. A wrong concept of "me" and "my" is the source of much pain and confusion.

The efforts that we make to liberate ourselves from the invaders that become a part of the dominant data in our computers must obviously be connected to our relationships with others. If they are not, if what we gain is kept hugged to our bosoms as personal profit, nothing will come of it – even for ourselves. In what I have suggested as some of the approaches to self-liberation much is implied for our dealings with others. In this context, I am referring to our contact with people in the peacemaking relationships, but it would be almost equally valid for virtually all other human interactions.

Firstly, and most importantly, we must learn to give people complete attention. We must make ourselves absolutely available to them not interposing our own fears, needs or preconceptions between them and us. This means that we must so far as possible switch off our computers, with their automatic and built-in needs, and respond to human beings as human beings rather than as objects who can either hurt or help us. This type of attention creates an aura of safety in which people can abandon their prickly defences and, as we say, be themselves. But even this fully human interaction is always precarious, because we are not usually very good at it. I recall one counselor who told me that if her attention to her client wavered for a minute he or she was aware and resentful – the contact was lost, and the expectation left unfulfilled. In order to give attention we

must be constantly conscious of the value and importance of the other person. This means also that we must ignore the possibly bad things we have heard of her or him. I remember visiting a well-known and very dangerous guerilla leader and attempting to give him attention. After a while he said with some surprise "no one else has ever come to see me smiling and relaxed". We became fast friends and were able to explore ways of finding humane rather than violent solutions to the situations he was involved in.

A part of giving attention is listening, not only hearing the words and noting their meaning, but listening to their sound which may convey something different – if you ask me how I am and I answer "fine" in a depressed tone of voice the sound conveys more than the actual words. And listening involves also sensitivity to unspoken feelings that are conveyed by other means. The Native Americans, as I have myself experienced, are very adept at this sort of listening. Attentive listening to another person reaches far below the surface and has a profound influence on the relationship of those involved.

A contact based on attention and listening is far from being a machine-like one. In a machine-like relationship we base our interaction on what is machine-like or automatic in each other. If, at this level, I am asked what I think of a particular man I shall describe him in terms of what we call personality traits. And these traits are simply the quirks, patterns of behaviour, habits of thought, automatic responses derived from his fears and pains that dominate his computer: they are nothing to do with the essential him and I must ignore them. It may not be easy to do this: most of our human evaluations are based on this sort of superficial judgement. I must therefore avoid giving "character sketches". I must reach below to what is living and vital. It

will help if, every time I meet people, I consciously avoid the temptation to type them and remain absolutely open to an understanding of their real self. Moreover, when I meet people I already know well, I must always be as open to them as if I were meeting them for the first time. To say, "oh, its poor old Joe again; we all know that he is this that and the other" will surely make Joe this that and the other, thus frustrating his capacity to be something quite different. Especially, we must be ready to see great beauty and goodness in the person we thought of as poor old Joe.

Not only must we avoid making judgements about people, we must avoid criticising them – we are all in the same boat, creatures who respond in a way that appears foolish or selfish but which we cannot help until we have learned how to; and if I see something ridiculous in you, you can no doubt see something similar in me. But if we once give in to the impulse to criticize and label people as silly, opinionated, self-centered or whatever, they tend to live up to our assessment of them. Tell a child often enough that it is stupid, or can't do mathematics, or draw and she/he won't be able to. I have suffered this myself and to my shame have inflicted it on others.

Instead of criticism, therefore, we must give support, encouragement, validation. Most of us have a poor opinion of ourselves because we have been told we are no good, or feel we have failed. And most of us, I am sad to say, have told someone else, a child, student, or mate, in a fit of irritation, or to get rid of some hurt or anger, that they are in some way deficient – and so contributed to their diminishment. On the contrary, we should do all we can to counteract the miserable sense of incompetence, inadequacy, impotence or folly from which most of us suffer. It is very easy. We simply have to tell people that we see them as wise,

brave, good and strong. But we cannot deceive them: we must really feel it because we really perceive it.

This does not mean that we must never tell our friends that they are wrong or behaving badly. There is an Indian legend about a snake that was converted by a guru and swore never to bite another person. But the local villagers took advantage of this and stoned it. The snake, angry and disillusioned complained to the guru who answered: "but I never told you not to hiss". We, too, must hiss if we see people doing wrong to themselves and others, but to hiss does not mean to harm. This is part of the obligation to explain and to help others to understand what they are doing. At one level we are able to do this by helping them to identify the fears and pains that dominate their computers, at another by explaining the ways in which they unconsciously manipulate and victimise others.

There are other duties we have towards our fellow human beings. We must refrain from subjecting them to our own fits of depression or anger or other negative emotions; these can only make life harder for them and to share our self-centered miseries cannot help us. In general, and at all times, we must be aware of them, conscious of the common ground of our being.

I began to try to apply these principles several years ago when it became clear that the skills of public peacemaking, diplomacy, bargaining and so on, were insufficient. At first I acted more or less intuitively. Later, when I tried to understand the apparent effectiveness of those methods, I had the opportunity to learn more of the principles behind the practice. I am now certain that what is essential to peacemaking is also of the greatest value in all human interaction.

In conclusion, I would like to reintroduce the public

dimension of peacemaking. The public and the private, the inner and the outer, the large and the small are merely different facets of the same whole, the same truth. If we consider them as being opposite or irreconcilable principles we won't see the truth. If we concentrate on one to the exclusion of the other the right things will not happen. If I simply work on myself and on my relationship with individuals to whom I am opposed or with whom I am acting as negotiator, I will not take into account the very different principles that govern scale events: the large is not just the small magnified, but in some ways differs in kind. Likewise, if I give all my attention to the large, the public, the outer, the right things will not happen because the large, although different from the small, private and inner is composed of these hidden dimensions. One might say the same of the relationship of a body to the cells that compose it. If I simply work on myself and ignore the other how shall I know myself since the other is part of myself, from whom my separation is illusory. If I simply work on the other ignoring myself, I shall not know him either since I can only see him clearly through eyes lightened by self knowledge. Peacemaking is the science of perceiving that things which appear to be apart are one. It is the art of restoring love to a relationship from which it has been driven by fear and hatred. And one last definition: public peacemaking is what we do; private peacemaking is what we are, the two being interpenetrating.

Calligraphy by Keith Wedmore, Pacific Yearly Meeting.

Printed by The Wider Quaker Fellowship, a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation (Section of the Americas), 1506 Race Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102.

3500/11-84