

Talk RGML-C&SAYM 11 April 2004, Morija, Lesotho

Sheldon G. Weeks

MY LIFE AS A FRIEND AND FELLOW TRAVELLER

“Lay hold on life and it will be thy joy and crown eternally”.

John Greenleaf Whittier

Shelagh Willet introduced Sheldon Weeks. He is 72. Born in New York City. He has qualifications from Quaker institutions, including Swarthmore and Harvard and worked in East Africa beginning in 1962. He has been in Botswana since December 1991. His longest period was seventeen years in Papua New Guinea. He has published widely on different subjects, conducted many consultancies, and travelled widely. His academic career has been combined with social concerns, including in Botswana dedicated work in connection with the Kagisano Society. His life has been a tapestry containing many strains, and one of the most clearly distinguishable is his Quaker faith.



Welcome:

‘The theme of the Yearly Meeting is taken from the FWCC triennial: “Being faithful witnesses - serving God in a changing world”. I was not aware of this until this week, but my theme, is not unrelated as it deals with my personal witness.

‘It is a pleasure to be here with you all at Morija, among the hills and the history, with all of you for a few days of seeking with Friends. To begin with let me take this opportunity to congratulate those of you who have been honoured by others during the year. I know of Noziziwe Madlala-Routledge and George Ellis. I am sure there are others.

‘I also wish to thank Gudrun for her commitment through difficult times. It has been good to know and love her for nearly fifty years. And my friend Collin Gonze whom I have also known for close

on fifty years, and who was editor of a number of publications, including Africa Today, and has read an earlier draft of this talk and commented on it.

Objectives:

‘I once led a Summer School at YM on “writing memoirs”. This has forced me to think about my own. I like Jim McCloy’s saying on Christabel Jackson’s card: “If you are searching for the truth, look out for surprises”.

‘In this talk I will try and share with you from my personal journey or my search to develop a work ethos, spirituality, friendships, social concerns and in efforts to promote social change. A major dichotomy, which influenced my development, was reflected in my family structure - the tension between violence and non-violence.

I will consider the impact my Quaker education has had on me, and try to weigh the meaning of some of my successes and failures. Life is full of contradictions and struggles and is not easy: are there any lessons to be drawn from them that I might share with you? My focus will be on the early “chapters” or decades in my life in the 1940s and 1950s, then a bit from the 1960s.

Governing principles:

‘What we are is determined by a mix of our inheritance and our experiences. I do not wish to discuss the nature-nurturance debate, but I personally believe we are a combination of both forces. Quakers, because of the testimonies we have inherited from the early Quakers which are still alive in us today, generally do not believe in absolute determinism, or in that man is inherently evil. Instead they proclaim that there is good in every person and that there lies the potential for change. Quakers worked with prisoners, the mentally ill, delinquents and sometimes wonder where is that “good”. Faith makes us carry on.

‘We all make assumptions about our past and who we are based on our personal events and our overall sense of the history that has engulfed us: how we see the processes we have lived through, that others have experienced, and what went before us. We all have a personal perspective or ideology, which influences our perceptions, even if we cannot articulate it, even if we lack an awareness of it. There will always be different versions of history, even within one family.

‘For example, when my Aunt published her autobiography, *Office Hours Day and Night*, my mother commented, “that is not the way I remember it”. And these were two sisters, born one year apart, growing up in the same family, going to the same schools (primary, secondary, university and graduate medical education). My Aunt saw life as one of entitlement, that where she had succeeded, it was deserved, and due to her efforts, and that anyone else could do it: they just had to work hard and excel, to emulate her. While my mother saw the struggles and uniqueness in each of them from a different perspective, with a recognition that success was never due to one’s own efforts, but was dependent on the support and contributions of others.

The emphasis on success, the Protestant ethic, on excelling in whatever one does, made it harder for me to digest, assimilate and accomplish failures when they occurred.

John Updike in his new novel *Seek My Face* (2004: 72) writes about the religious sense of failure. The heroine father was a Pennsylvania Quaker. Her father, Hope in her childhood came to sense, had a **religious sense of failure** ... His pious ancestors were fanatics risking hanging and exile in their zeal to strip Christianity back to its uncorrupted essence, made him feel a failure in his worldly status ... [his successes as a lawyer and in other ways]—none of this seemed, by the inner light that burned deeply within him, enough. In thinking about this I realize that I have been bothered all my life by this sense of failure.

Origins of the dichotomy:

‘I was born into a matriarchal family. My mother (1900) and her sister (1901) both became successful medical doctors. They were pioneers when very few women became medical doctors. They were leaders in their own fields and communities. As their skills were in demand they did not cease to work during the depression, as did their husbands.

‘I am a third child: one sister is four years older, my brother two years older, younger sister five years later. All three became medical doctors. I didn’t.

Tensions between violence and non-violence:

‘My parents were different: my father represented to a degree the use of force or violent solutions, while my mother represented peaceful alternatives.

‘My father was born in 1885, studied engineering at MIT, but didn’t finish. He had wanted to go into medicine; his father refused him absolutely. He worked in all three fields of engineering (civil, electrical and mechanical). In World War I he became a Captain in the Air Force (Lighter than air craft - he flew balloons and dirigibles). He continued to be known as “Captain Weeks” throughout his life. He didn’t get married until he was 40. Then he married a medical doctor.

‘His life is fraught by seeming failures: he didn’t graduate from college and he went bankrupt during the depression (he was a pioneer in manufacturing and marketing electronic and mechanical advertising techniques for public spaces now seen all over the world). My father, as a soldier, had never fought. He’d never gone overseas. Bankruptcy and later unemployment forced him to be dependent on his wife.

I’ll always remember his office on 42nd Street above the park by the New York Public Library. I learned to type around five-years old looking out a window over the park (I typed first the letters of the alphabet, then the numbers and symbols, finally stories, and the complete layout of “little little” books, for my younger sister).

‘He was an ardent supporter of the National Rifle Association, a lifetime member, and he gave me my first gun when I was six years old (a 0.22 single shot rifle). I used to sleep with it by my bed, loaded. I had fantasies of defending the family against burglars. He used corporal punishment, with the question when angry at my behaviour, “which end of the belt do you want to be beaten with?” meaning I had a choice between the buckle and the leather strap. This treatment caused a degree of anger, frustration and fuelled the aggression and fantasies in me. I felt he favoured my younger sister and I was often punished for her wrong doings, resulting in a lifetime of personal over-reaction or vehemence against being falsely accused.

‘In World War II he built Liberty ships in California and then worked outside Niagara Falls building as major TNT plant. After the war he went to Alaska to build an airbase at Mile 26 outside Fairbanks (the runway was one mile across and eight miles long so that planes could take off from camouflaged bunkers (secret hangers on each side of the runway). Then in Minnesota doing a development plan for the State. It was his last job.

‘His other side was also there: he was a Deacon in the local Anglican (Episcopalian) Grace Church, was a “Big Brother” and a Boy Scout leader. Fencing and tennis were his sports, stamp collecting his hobby, and he won awards for his specialist displays (ships, trains, sports).

‘My mother, born in 1900, was an amateur tennis champion, went to Brearley and Wellesley, then Cornell Medical and became a life-long paediatrician, with a practice on Brooklyn Heights in New York City. Her office was in the basement of the family house where we grew up - 20 Willow Street - an old grey brick “six” storey building on a corner with a small back yard and a rare Ginkgo tree. As a paediatrician she had 4,000 patients (the normal load was 1,000) and was a community figure. She started a nursery school at Grace Church and remained their doctor until she left NYC in 1975. She was also the doctor for Brooklyn Friends School where my siblings and I (and some of my children) attended for a family total of 68 years. [And where my daughter Edisa was awarded the George Fox Alumni Prize in 2003 (20 years after she graduated from Grade 12) - but she asked me “who is George Fox?” I got her a copy of Fox’s journal from the Brooklyn Monthly Meeting library.] My mother was the caregiver and set an example of community service. She was one of the last doctors in New York City to make house calls. She went with her

English Springer spaniel. Only my younger sister, Elinor, and myself became Friends (1956 for me and mid-1960s for her).

Work ethic—the formative years:

‘Much of what made me happened in the first 12 years of my life.

‘One’s work ethic comes partly from one’s family. I learned from both parents and from my maternal grandfather (who conformed to Eric Erickson’s model of the grandfather: he was stern, ruthless, accomplished, and standard setter, a “Jack-of-all trades”). John Willard Travell, also a medical doctor, was a pioneer in electrostatic medicine, with a house at office at 9 West 16th Street, the front room filled with a giant electro-static machine. He prided himself on being able to do nearly anything: plumbing, carpentry, farming, animal husbandry, fruit trees, grafting, tree farming, maintenance, etc. He believed that anything you wanted to do you could do. He held up as an example Mark Twain’s *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s court*”. He had known Twain as they both were residents near Washington Square. He also was a jokester and a man with a sense of humour. As a child and adolescent he was a renegade - he would regale us with stories of his misadventures.

‘One example, when he was in his eighties: he had been to an African-Zionist church in Harlem and come away with a hand full of collection tokens, like light aluminium coins, which had printed on one side the name of the church (and “The Gift of God is Eternal Life”) and the other “The Wages of Sin is Death”. They were the same size and weight of ice cream tokens as Swarthmore College. My friends and I put them into circulation and enjoyed a lot of free ice cream for “The Wages of Sin is Death”.

‘His first wife had died. His second wife had a farm in Westfield, New Jersey. She had a Renault 1904 “hop toad”, and was the first female autogyro pilot - she used to fly over us. His farm was in Sheffield, in western Massachusetts in the Berkshires 200 km from New York City. His Model T was one of the first vehicles in the Housatonic Valley. He had a passion for trees: tree farm planting, fruit trees pruning, grafting “Sheldon Pear”. He loved to fish, but with earthworms, giant “night crawlers” that he would collect by torch light at midnight in Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village. Enquiring police he would talk into joining him in the search. He’d take the worms to the country to use as bait. He had us set out lines to catch eels in Ironworks Brook two kilometres away down a hill where we would have to walk. I have a vivid memory of dozens of eels hung out on a clothesline. I couldn’t eat them, hardly touch them.

‘He was a severe disciplinarian, one whom to spare the rod spoiled the child. Each year he wanted to make elderberry wine: we were beaten for playing instead of collecting our quota of the fruit. A better memory is making peach ice cream in an old crank machine on the porch on a hot summer’s afternoon following a meal of our own freshly picked corn. He played tennis until eighty, and could still beat me when I was a teenager. He died at 96. He learned his daughter’s techniques for injecting novocaine into trigger areas in muscles, and he was so good with the needles that I preferred him to inject me than any of the others. He practised medicine until in his eighties too. He was also a member of the Magician’s Union and would perform at birthday parties. It was a skill I learned from him and books.

Link between play and work

‘During World War II we had Victory Gardens at the farm in Massachusetts. We even got extra petrol coupons so we could drive the 200 km there from New York City to work on it: I assisted, and had my own rows, own crops (I developed a passion for string beans, which became my nickname). We put up a hundred quarts of string beans at the end of each summer for preserves for winter, along with other crops.

‘When bulk freezers came in where you rented a locker, we processed them for freezing. There we also played, making “Wind in the Willows” - we constructed our own roads and bridges for our

bikes, about one metre wide, and dug and dammed our own swimming hole.

‘The hardest war effort work I did then was shovelling coal for three weeks, first out of railway cars into the warehouse and then into cellars of the school and other customers. Adult males were simply not available to do the work because of the War. The next hardest at twelve was shovelling out our septic tank (I had an attack of typhoid, or something, afterwards). One learns how difficult life is for the working man who suffers this grinding toil year after year and has no escape from it.

‘When I was ten I built my first house, five metres up in a large forked maple tree, complete with four walls, roof, bosun’s chair, folding bed, porch, and electric lights from a tractor battery! I was very proud of this as the farm had no electricity.

My father invented a dart game called “war”, involving a sheet of plywood 4 x 8 feet with an upright wall in the middle so you could not see the opponent’s side, which we played a lot.

‘Then when I was twelve, with my brother who was two years older, we built an 8 x 10 foot log cabin at a secret site half a kilometre away in the woods (with my brother and a friend, three bunk beds, one on top of the other in layers and a small cast iron stove; later I added a porch and fireplace, with another friend from Norway).

We had our guns with us. We had to make our own ammunition; we even made more guns from parts, made from a sawed-off shotgun and two pistols - all highly illegal. All worked, but the shotgun shells did not have enough ump (afraid blow up gun).

At twelve I had three jobs in Brooklyn, New York, during Fall, Winter and Spring that paid money. The first was as a professional choirboy - singing in the choir at Grace Anglican Church (my brother joined the Boy Scouts). We had four rehearsals and one performance a week: Tuesday and Thursday after school, Friday evening with the men and before the service on Sunday, followed by the Sunday service. This was another form of religious education. Funerals paid the best. So did special services at Christmas and Easter. My first time to sing with the choir in the church was at a four-hour long communion mass where we sang Bach’s St. Matthew’s Passion. It was an introduction one never forgets. Also to music and religion in ways Quakers still cannot offer.

‘For my second job, I became the cook for the family (I was paid \$5 a week, which I spent on my stamp collection). It was war, and help was not available. I became an expert on spaghetti and sauce. My third job, which was obtained by accident, was as a sports writer for the daily newspaper *The Brooklyn Eagle*”. I was tutored by the sports editor in style, expression, colour, and use of adjectives and organization of sports articles. I was paid one dollar an inch for the copy that was finally used.

‘I attended Brooklyn Friends School from 1937 to 1949, a school with 13 grades in one place. There I also did a lot of practical work, which was voluntary and educational. I became the school projectionist, school printer, school photographer (built a dark room, lens from grandfather) and carpenter for school dramatic shows (sets). I also helped on the school newspaper, yearbook as journalist and school photographer.

‘As a Quaker school it had assembly and weekly Meeting in the formal Meeting House. One indelible lesson was in 1943 going door to door in Brooklyn Heights to collect food for Japanese-Americans incarcerated in camps (Nisei). We were invariable greeted with disgust, a harangue and doors slammed in our face: “how could you be asking us to do anything to assist the enemy?” (a strong lesson for a twelve year-old).

‘One senses how much Quakers in Southern Africa are missing out by there being no Friends’ School here.

Violence:

‘Though violence surrounded us in the war, in comics, movies, on the radio, it was also personal. I

had to walk 1.2 km to school. In the afternoon in the winter it gets dark early. I had to confront the “Ice Pick” gang who wanted your money, your watch, anything you had. You learned to travel with empty pockets, to wear old shoes, and to avoid the streets by going through buildings and backyards. One friend broke his arm trying to escape the gang when he fell off a wall twelve meters high into the street below. This was also a lesson in “class dynamics” as the members of the gang were all from a working class background. The other children in the choir were working class, and they all had to give their earnings to their parents to help the family survive. I was privileged to keep my money.

‘How else does violence appear in ones life? In the ways in which we confront conflict. My father made my brother take boxing lessons. I wasn’t interested. Still ...

I’ll give one example how in a violent culture children learn to confront violence. When around twelve I built a small rowboat on Lake Ontario. When it was stolen by neighbour boys, I went after them with my 22 rifle to return it, and I was so angry I could have shot them. By then I’d bought a 22 automatic rifle (a “Savage” which I carefully selected) from the money I earned from various jobs. I was close to becoming a child murderer and spending the early part of my life in detention. How easy it is to kill. In my mind, day and night dreams, I had a violent fantasy life. This was supported by World War II that was raging around me at that time. I was so angry my boat had been stolen that I could have killed.

‘I could act out my violence at the family “farm” in the Berkshires in Massachusetts. I shot, and notched on the rifle butt, red squirrels, chipmunks and the occasional woodchuck. My father approved; my mother was more reticent. When challenged to prove that I was a sharpshooter, I demonstrated that I could bring a swallow down from the sky with one shot of my 0.22 rifle, a woodchuck in a field with my 0.38 Smith and Weston revolver, and a twelve point deer with our 0.348 Winchester repeating rifle. These were the last times I used these guns, because soon after I became a pacifist.

Race:

‘Another source of a personal concern for equality, justice and race is perhaps derived from a great uncle whose home we used to visit in New Jersey a few times a year in the 1930s. He had been a missionary in Liberia and enjoyed telling stories about his life there and his collection of arts and crafts. The Quaker testimony on equality was taught to us indirectly at Brooklyn Friends School. It became a significant guiding benchmark. Marxism also stood for equality of all peoples (gender, race, ability). This latter commitment was compromised when they put fighting the Axis powers above equality.

‘Growing up in a segregated United States (even de facto) meant that I didn’t have any real contact with any minority groups until I was sixteen and working in Alaska. An early memory in Sheffield is being reprimanded by my mother when I was about five for saying in the village square: “Look at that pikininy”. I was told not to use that word. Sheffield, a small village, then with only 1,700 people, had a black ghetto called “Guinea”.

‘This all changed when at seventeen, I went to Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. Swarthmore was one of the three Quaker colleges in Eastern Pennsylvania - the others being Bryn Mar and Haverford which were then single-sex. Swarthmore is now over 130 years old. Gudrun’s mother had gone there during World War I.

‘In 1949 this Quaker college reflected the dominant white society. The student body were predominately whites (WASPS) and under-represented the minorities (they still had quotas against Jews). In 1949 Swarthmore had two African American students. In 1950 four Nigerians came on British government scholarships. One of my roommates was a Nisei. Three of these Nigerians, Layiwola Shoyinka, Chucks Umeadi and Obi Atuanya I invited to our house at 20 Willow Street and to the farm in Sheffield for holidays (one was spent doing a major logging operation using two large chain saws).

In May 1953 I met Mburumba Kerina from South West Africa (Namibia) at the Swarthmore Meeting House, where local Friends had invited him to talk about conditions at home. He was then a student at Lincoln University south of the Mason-Dixon line in Pennsylvania. He also moved into my extended family at 20 Willow Street and at the farm in Sheffield. In 2003 he asked me to write his biography, so that is one of the projects I am currently working on. Mburumba was the first to leave Southern Africa, the first Namibian to testify with Rev Michael Scott at the UN (to the 4th Committee on non-self governing territories). The idea of creating SWAPO out of OPO originated with us at 20 Willow Street: he was the originator of the name “Namibia”; and he married a Friend he met through me, Jane Miller, an African-American from California. Interesting that Bessie Head’s first published story outside Southern Africa was about Jane, called *An American Woman in Africa* from their stay in Serowe between 1963 and 1965.

‘Through my work with the AFSC running UN Seminars I had gotten to know a set of key members of the 4th Committee from Yugoslavia, India, Uruguay, Liberia and Ethiopia. I introduced Mburumba to them. We recorded a wire recording on conditions in South West Africa at 20 Willow Street and presented it to the 4th Committee. A decision for them to listen to it had to be made by the International Court of Justice at the Hague because South Africa challenged the tape. I also got Sydney D. Bailey at the Quaker UN House to mediate between Rev. Michael Scott and Mburumba Kerina when Scott refused to trust Kerina. (This event is not mentioned: see Sydney D. Bailey’s *Quaker Work at the United Nations’ in Peace is a Process*, Swarthmore Lecture, 1993, pp. 101-173).

‘I made friends with students from Kenya and Ethiopia who stayed at 20 Willow and at the farm too. This was before the wave of independence in Africa (starting with Ghana in 1957, Nigeria 1960, and then spreading through East Africa beginning with Tanzania in 1961). I was present for Uganda’s in 1962 and Kenya’s in 1963. There was a commitment to working for independence in all colonies.

‘Others at 20 Willow Street and Sheffield were my brother’s friends from India and Korea and my older sister’s French and Polish friends (Maria returned to Poland and I visited her there ten years later in 1960). My grandfather called 20 Willow Street “international house”. He was suddenly learning a tolerance he never had before. This was harder with his other daughter, my mother’s sister (Janet Travell), who instructed me not to bring any non-white people to the farm. She was contradicted both by her husband, who was from South Carolina, and indirectly by her “employer”, who was a Democrat and congressman, then Senator (John F. Kennedy). She moved into the White House in 1960 (she had been his doctor from 1946). She shifted her ground to accepting individuals, but not the group. Chuks Umeadi (another Nigerian at Swarthmore College) had won her over with his charm while washing dishes together one Christmas at the farm.

Values:

‘Who cared for what was wrong with the world? It was as if only two groups, seemingly poles apart, did. Quakers and Communists. I became involved with both.

In 1949 at Swarthmore I met, liked, and was influenced by people who came from diametrically opposed perspectives. Newton Garver, a pacifist and a conscientious objector, had just got out of prison. His arguments were devastating, demanding and convincing. I was pleased to be able to reprint an article by him in *SAQN* 26 & 27.

‘Then there were the social and political activists. I participated in the meetings and activities of the Young Progressives of America (YPA). The YPA was left over from the year before when Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace had run on the progressive party ticket for President of the United States. Swarthmore also had a group of war vets, studying under the GI Bill, and these were mature people who had been through it in different theatres of war. The key left-wing theoretician among the students at Swarthmore College then was Zeke Montgomery.

‘My roommate, Eddie Fujima, was also influential through many long hours of debate and discussion. He was a Nisei, who was in Japan during the war, but was able to reinstate his US citizenship. He too came to the farm one summer and two of us painted the whole house on the outside. He gave me his 0.38 Smith and Weston service revolver, which I kept hidden there and used to shoot woodchucks (another highly illegal weapon).

‘Another roommate was Danny Rubin, a Philadelphian with the closest connection to people in the labour movement and on the left. He later became a lifetime leader in the Communist Party (USA). These people, and others, were at the heart of action. They were the ones who wanted to do something about the sad state of affairs: racism - Willie McGee was up to be executed just for looking at a white woman; the separate “but equal school”, unequal systems (only in May 1954, came the new laws on Civil Rights); equality of opportunity (admission policies at Swarthmore with only a few Blacks, a quota against Jews - ironic as today Swarthmore, as a liberal arts college, has perhaps the highest proportion of students of colour in the States); the war machine, nuclear testing, the Hydrogen Bomb, the Rosenbergs to be executed for so-called spying; the conditions of workers in Pennsylvania - we gave support for striking coal miners by raising money and collecting donations of food; relations to the Soviet Union, the Eastern Block and China; opposition to the oppression inherent in McCarthyism; opposition to militarism within the college - we succeeded in getting rid of the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) unit at Swarthmore. And many other activities.

‘When the FBI or other agents would come to interview me at the college about my activities I would always make them go up to the student commons and invite other students to listen to the interview - so I would have witnesses. One of the questions was, “Have you ever associated with a Communist?”. I pointed out that President Eisenhower couldn’t answer that question.

Analysis:

‘Hours were spent discussing issues, direction, strategies and decision before actions. Marxism was seen as a tool to assist in this process, balanced with concern for who benefits and who suffers - the consequence of actions. Was this type of analysis the most effective? It was certainly hotly contested and lacked consensus. My critical attitudes favoured non-violent direct action. All this at the height of repression during the McCarthy period, which now pales compared to President George Bush, the Patriot Act and other forms of thought control (digital “security” today eclipsed anything available in the 1950s). Though I do not know if Bush has moved to build camps to incarcerate up to half a million people as was done secretly under Eisenhower to accommodate 100,000 reds and 400,000 pinks (or fellow travellers - the labels then applied to dissenters).

‘The rise of power of the Nationalists in South Africa and their pursuit of Communists with their allies was also accelerating at this time. In the United States the reversals came with the change of Government, the victory of the Democratic Party led by J. F. Kennedy in 1959. The USA remained staunchly anti-communist until the fall of the system in 1990. The struggle in South Africa also took another thirty years and was helped by world events.

Pacifist/Quaker and fellow travellers:

‘I attended meetings of a small cell group in Chester, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere, at the home of dock workers and Communists to study *The History of the Communist Party, USSR* and *The History of the Communist Party, USA*. Ideology became important, the ability to assess the class struggle, to understand and use the dialectical method of analysis. We studied the doctrines (dialectical analysis) calling for the violent overthrow of the governments, but I personally did not espouse it. My friends who were left or communist I liked and respected. But I eventually called myself a “Marxian Socialist Pacifist”.

‘I also was active in Quaker circles, but had not yet become a Quaker. At Swarthmore I tried to promote various community service activities, taking students to work in mental hospitals and on

weekend workcamps in Philadelphia organized and run by David Richie. These were carried out with other friends who shared my concern for social action, in a sense separate from those friends who were involved in political action. David Richie came to South Africa and had an impact around the same time on Shelagh Willet after she attended one of his workcamps in the 1960s.

Issue of working with Communists?

‘This never bothered me. I was labelled a Fellow Traveller because I was willing to work with Communists. I shared objectives with them, though embraced different methods. We would meet and agree on non-violence in the running of demonstrations. In my experience we kept to it.

‘Others I knew and worked with would never work with Communists and were afraid even to work with so-called Pinks. They believed that they could not trust them. They feared betrayal from the left, that they would stab you in the back.

‘Examples were given: the treason trials in the USSR staged by Stalin; the contradictions in the Spanish Civil War (the writings of Arthur Koestler, particularly his novel, *Darkness at Noon* (published 1940); the 1940 “non-aggression pact” between Hitler and the USSR, which became party line (in the USSR and for Communists in the USA and elsewhere). Where and how are policies made? The Russian invasion of Hungary was in 1956. Major waves of falling out from the Communist Party resulted from this.

‘When under the Freedom of Information Act I tried to get my files to see what the FBI, CIA and other agencies had recorded on me there was nearly nothing from the 1950s, but hundreds of pages after that. The grounds for deletion or non-release of information was that it would violate security (reveal who was informing the agencies about me).

‘One startling item in my FBI files was a photocopy of a book review I had written of Nelson Mandela’s new book, *Long Walk to Freedom*. The editors of the *Boston Herald* had liked the review so much they printed it as their editorial for that day (early 1964). Why include such an item in my FBI file? It truly reflects how agents of repression think: “Mandela was in jail as a terrorist, seeking to overthrow the government of South Africa. I had treated him positively. Therefore I must be ...”

Travels—expanded horizons

‘My development was also influenced by my travels between 1948 and 1954 when I lost the right to travel; my passport was not re-issued. I was one of thirty Americans to lose the privilege - not yet a right - to travel. In 1948 for the summer I worked as a labourer in Fairbanks, Alaska, when I was sixteen, building the University of Alaska. In 1949 in Europe, I visited workcamps, cycled 2,500 km. and stayed in Youth Hostels. In Venice I met a student from Prague, Czechoslovakia, who told me, “you haven’t seen Europe if you’ve only been to Western Europe”. He wanted me to see what life was like on the other side of the Iron Curtain. We were aware of the putsch in 1948 but justified it using arguments from Czech Christian Socialists who still supported the new regime. My hosts in Paris were must upset that I had made friends in Germany with Germans, the enemy!

‘In 1950 I obtained seaman’s papers, and travelling on *The Flying Enterprise*, arrived in Europe the day Korean war was declared (Captain Carlsen didn’t want to sign me off in Antwerp, Belgium). I went on to a World Council of Churches workcamp in Napoli, Italy. We were an international group from Japan, Germany, France and so on. The local police added people to our camp who had been robbed of everything. The most interesting were destitutes from Sicily (a land of the Mafia, payback, and extreme violence that produced the lesser known “Sicilian Gandhi”, Danilo Dolci - see the book *Fire under the Ashes* by James McNeish).

‘The city of Naples had been 90% destroyed during the war, and so far was only 10% rebuilt. People were still living in caves. Our project was to build foundations for an ecumenical hospital.

I went back ten years later, only to find what we had started to build by hand on the Vomero was now NATO Naval headquarters. Most distressing.

From Naples I went on to attend the International Union of Students (IUS) World Congress in Prague and to find friends, and meet others. I learned how Central America was to the welfare of people throughout the world, as American policies impacted on others. There I was invited to China and French Indo-China (Vietnam). Americans were banned from going to Czechoslovakia in 1950. I was one of a small number to violate the ban on travel to Czechoslovakia; the ban was stamped in every US passport.

‘While there I became paralysed with Meningitis. In hospital I was given raw or impure penicillin (the West was denying medicines). When I tried to leave I was hospitalised for medical complications in Hamburg, first in a British Army hospital, then, because I was not entitled to “services”, a German civilian one.

‘In those days a US passport was only good for two years (now it is ten). I was able to get my passport renewed only because I had visited Nathaniel Davis (a friend of my mother’s whom I had stayed with him the year before in Firenze, Italy where he worked in the US Consulate) at the US Embassy in Prague. Later he became ambassador to Chile and instrumental in planning the coup to overthrow Allende that brought in Pinochet in 1974.

‘Next I went to study at the University of Edinburgh (1951-1952). My digs mate proved to be head of Communist student group, and my girlfriend was an active member who had just returned from a stay in the Soviet Union. When there was a public debate on “Which is a greater threat to world peace, the US or the Soviet Union?” I participated, on the side that the US is the greater threat. It still is today.

With the Apathetic Society (sic) at the University of Edinburgh we organized a platform for a student group from China to speak. The British National Union of Students had invited them to Great Britain, but was providing them no assistance. We were the only ones to meet their train when they arrived in Edinburgh. In Edinburgh when I moved out of the digs into a small house on Atholl Crescent Lane my roommates were from England, Turkey and Nigeria. Julius Nyerere was part of the African group at the university (he was studying education at Murray House).

‘When on holiday in London I carried out a survey of Chinese in London on my motorcycle. The government allegation was that they were sending money to Communists on the mainland of China. With a Chinese student on pillion seat of my motorcycle, we toured businesses in East London. It was a grassroots survey that did not support the allegations (and revealed how politicians and journalist may arrive at an agenda not based on facts). It was a good lesson about negative journalism and the use of disinformation.

‘Also when in Edinburgh, with the Student Christian Union, I organized a weekend workcamp in the Dumbydykes. Slum buildings there had been neglected for hundred of years. It was modelled on the weekend workcamps run by David Richie in Philadelphia.

‘In June 1952 I joined an Isbrandtsen ship at Genoa as a seaman and got off in Karachi, Pakistan to join an Service Civil International (the main European international workcamp organization established after WWI by Pierre Ceresole) workcamp in Laluket, and than on to another workcamp in the Simla Hills in India.

I had a choice, to stay in India, or get on boat from Bombay back to New York. My temporary seamen’s papers were granted by telegram the day we were to leave. Then I missed my boat in Manila. I had to fly Tokyo, where I joined an AFSC workcamp. In Yokohama I was able to rejoin my ship as purser (on a full salary because they were missing a seaman). The Captain required me to go through the Panama Canal to New York. On arrival in New York City, he requested that I “not give a bad report”. (I was assumed to be an agent, and for that reason I was not beaten up in San Francisco and Los Angeles).

‘I spent another summer working in Alaska in 1953 as an engineer, GS4, rebuilding the Alaska Highway. We were based 300 km east of Fairbanks. I got permission from the Tetlin Indian Reservation elders to build a log cabin on their land on an escarpment above the Tanana River (fall in and you’ll survive for at the most six minutes because of the silt and extreme cold). I had with me my 22 rifles and a 0.348 Winchester (elephant gun). We lived “off the land”, mainly from Arctic grayling and rabbits, fishing and hunting daily after work. We worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week, but this was summer and the sun hardly set.

‘When the Native Americans would go hunting with us I could see game before they did (better eyesight due to privilege and diet). They issued an invitation to stay, to work on their 200 km long trap line, using sled dogs. The dogs were kept during the summer in a village with 400 dogs and four people to feed them. But I returned to Swarthmore College.

In 1954 a choice: not to be an engineer, but a humanist.

‘Because of my record in Alaska as an engineer, I won a job at Thule, Greenland, building a military airbase. A recent novel, *No one thinks of Greenland*, portrays this ludicrous base and its impact on the Inuit people. I was also invited back to the Manhattanville Neighbourhood Centre for a second summer in Harlem as a social worker. The first summer was in 1952, when I was the only non-graduate employed as a social group worker with two gangs (six-eight year-olds and fourteen-nineteen year-olds). For the Lotharios, entrance was based on proof you had raped a woman. My supervision was excellent: it was through daily process records, weekly sessions with supervisors, both African-American women. This was an extraordinary learning experience.

‘So I decided I did not want to become an engineer. I wanted to continue to work in social action. I asked if I could open the settlement house from 5 to 10 p.m. and weekends (it was normally closed). I was allowed to do so, if nothing happened. Nothing did. It was a well-established centre with traditions that were respected. Hundreds of youth came in off the streets to play basketball, pool, games room, and crafts.

‘I went on from there to work at Reverend Jim Robinson’s Morningside Community Centre (he was the founder of Operations Crossroads Africa). Morningside Community Centre was new and still being tested. I could not do what I had done at Manhattanville Neighbourhood Centre. I had to prove myself. One technique was to take violence on to one’s self. Beat me, not him. So the kid would start hitting my stomach like a punching bag. “Teach, it hurts?” Involuntarily tears were running down my cheeks from the pain. But a transformation was achieved. Not only did I become accepted, but also the youth stopped fighting.

‘Later, when running Sheffield Projects (not for profit) we adopted A.S. Neil’s (“Summerhill”) “award the thief”, with interesting results. The thesis is that kids are stealing love. One camper attacked another workcamper with a hunting knife, so I made a present of a knife to the offender.

In 1955 I became a Conscientious Objector:

‘I was now living in New York City, first at home, then in Greenwich Village (Jones Street in a \$25 a month flat). Then 111th Street in Spanish Harlem - that part of Harlem east of Central Park where people from Puerto Rico and later all of Central and South America congregated, where the tenement population was so dense that 150 million people could have lived on the island of Manhattan if that same density had been repeated everywhere. We rented a six room, \$20 a month, sixth floor walk-up flat, which we later turned into a base for weekend workcamps. Institutional Service Units at Manhattanville State Hospital was just across a footbridge on Ward’s Island.

‘From social work, I then moved to work for the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), New York City office, first as Projects Secretary, then as Youth Secretary (1954-1959). The AFSC was first housed underneath the 20th Street Meeting House. We then moved the office a block away to Third Avenue, then 218 East 18th Street (all in the Gramercy Park area).

‘To be recognized as a Conscientious Objector one had to belong to an established peace church and profess a belief in God or a Supreme Being (SB). At this time I was something between an agnostic and an atheist. I developed a long, convoluted argument interpreting Supreme Being broadly and in a humanist context. My Draft Board in Brooklyn accepted my explanation, but I will never know if their recognition of me as a Conscientious Objector was based on reading my twenty-page document, or because of my mother’s reputation in the community. Politics in the States is based on a reciprocal system of granting favours and benefits to those who in other contexts have helped you. My mother could have been the doctor for some Board Members’ children or grandchildren? Later Dan Seeger had to take his humanist arguments to be recognized as a CO all the way to the Supreme Court. He followed me as Youth Secretary in the AFSC, NYC Office.

Alternative Service:

‘I was assigned by my Draft Board to the American Friends Service Committee, NYC Office, for two years (1955 and 1956) where I was already working, first as Projects Secretary, then as Youth Secretary. I was responsible for organizing workcamps, institutional service units (mental hospital), UN Seminars, film festivals called “Images of Man”, and other activities. Robert Gilmore was in charge of the office. Our secretary was Marjorie Gatchell, another graduate of Swarthmore College. We had critical links with the FOR (AJ Muste), WRL, (Bayard Rustin) and many others including Dave Dillinger, Igal Rodenko and David McReynolds; and from the Catholic Worker, Dorothy Day and Ammon Hennacy the Catholic Worker religious pacifist anarchists. Bayard Rustin was the most articulate of this powerful group, an African American leader who become Martin Luther King’s advisor. I reviewed his biography in *SAQN* (Number 5, March 1998, page 35).

Spirituality: charisma, leadership versus spirituality (within, without)

‘Who is a “Spiritual Leader”?’

‘When I was working for the AFSC (1954-1959), word got back to me that others were calling me a very “spiritual leader”. When I heard this I was most embarrassed. I did not consider myself a spiritual person, and was not sure I was a leader.

Life never seemed so straightforward that a label could be applied. Instead it was a quandary, it was a heady mix of challenges, and the values were often very confused.

‘There was a strong sense of a lack of consistency, contradictions and of failures.

Were there limits to be imposed on the capacity to love? Monogamy versus polygamy (serial/simultaneous). We are told that if we love we may have and love many children, love other people, but we are permitted only to love one wife. Gandhi’s search was for truth, but we never seem to search for better relationships? If one has failed in relationships, can one be a spiritual leader?

‘Who can be a spiritual leader? Any of us? Or just a few people? Is it something unique, a quality reserved for only a few? Is it a characteristic special to unusual people. Buddha, Mohammed, Jesus, Gandhi, Khan, King? Or is it something we can all attain?’

‘Can you teach spirituality? Leeds University in 2004 offers a core module for all undergraduates on “Spirituality”. Questions asked on the course are: “Who am I? Is there hope for the world? How can I change the world? What are the core dimensions of humanity?” Individuals need not be religious to be spiritual. Rev Simon Robinson who runs the course at Leeds said, “Spirituality is about awareness of the capacity to respond to the ‘other’ ... spirituality gives our lives meaning through our relationships with others” (Times Higher Education Supplement, 19 December 2003, page 6).

Listening, caring, understanding ... all this is the key to spirituality?

Maybe I was more of a spiritual person that I was willing to admit?

Friday Night Discussion Group:

‘Robert Gilmore (AFSC), Bayard Rustin (WRL) and A.J. Muste (FOR) ran a “Friday night discussion group” in Robert’s basement flat on St Marks Place in Manhattan. This was a key place where issues of strategies were discussed - FOR, WRL, AFSC, SANE, and others. Demonstrations were planned. We could have eighty people there and the dynamic was still as if it was twelve. Bayard had an extraordinary capacity to involve people. Though he had been a communist briefly, he felt betrayed by them over issues of race (the war against fascism became more important to them), but believed the struggle for peace must include everyone who was willing to work, that no group could be excluded. Bayard had made his first trip to Africa in 1952, and was planning non-violent direct action there (Jervis Andersen, “Bayard Rustin: *Troubles I have Seen*, New York, Harper Collins, 1997).

‘An example of a march that we planned which had as its destination the UN: we had for SANE 5,000 on a march to the UN to protest nuclear bomb testing. They’d begun the day before in three separate marches, 17 miles out (the radius of destruction of a hydrogen bomb) on Long Island, New Jersey and Westchester. The police had realized we were walking down a one-way street and they couldn’t drive against the traffic. The police wanted us to change the route of a march which had been agreed to in advance. I was leading. I requested the police for permission to pass “down the line” and back came their ultimatum: “If we refuse to change the route we will all be arrested”. The word came back to “Keep going”. No one was arrested.

Communes:

‘During the later 1950s I also had an intense interest in communes. I both organized visits to them and workcamps with them. With Gudrun I visited Macedonia in Georgia (where Staunton and Alice Lynd were), and different Bruderhof Communities in New York, Connecticut and North Dakota (her mother was briefly a member of the Bruderhof). Also the Catholic Worker farms on Staten Island and at Nyack, New York. Dave Dellinger’s farm in New Jersey where “Liberation” was produced and Bob Luitweiler’s at Emmaus, Pennsylvania (the founder of SERVAS - an international hospitality organization trying to promote peace). At the Bruderhof, when asked what are you doing about promoting peace or achieving racial equality, the answer always was, “People can join us and thus achieve those objectives”.

Social action:

‘Under the umbrella of the AFSC, but through new organizations we created, we embarked on a major innovation in East Harlem, called the Friends Neighbourhood Group sponsored by the “New York Friends Group Inc”. We received funds through the Gandhian Foundation that had been set up by Terry Evans who was the next AFSC Projects Secretary. The roots of our approaches were in the work of Jane Adams and others in Chicago, also a doctor in London, and Dave Richie in Philadelphia. Further east and on 107th Street (and a few streets north and south) was another programme that inspired us (The East Harlem Protestant Parrish). The concept was one of commitment, an urban community living in the community.

‘It was inspired also by a workcamp I’d been to in Sheffield, UK in 1951-1952 on the “submerged tenth”, those not reached by welfare and the Labour government. Some members of the Friends Neighbourhood Group (FNG) had jobs, but they were to sustain (common purse) the others who would work full time on promoting self-reliance and problem solving in the area. Only a few lived at the house (Hope and Danny Murrow) while the others lived in the community.

‘Perhaps the most lasting fruit of that time was the private East Harlem Schools. I remember going to have lunch with Mrs. Crumm at the Colony Club (my grandmother had been a member, and thus she would see me), and getting her to release her property in East Harlem for the first school.

‘Mark Lane was our lawyer who helped us set up Sheffield Projects Incorporated (not-for-profit) and get it approved in Albany. There were many threads. But because of Abby Rockefeller the

work in Sheffield evolved to embrace youth from elsewhere in the East, out of prison, off reservations for Native Americans, and so on. I wrote about Sheffield Projects and the camp before the school in the Catholic Worker (the article should now be on the web as old copies were being digitalized). The school's objective was passing the High School Equivalency Exam., but did anyone do that? Instead it got people out of their situations, and they perhaps learned more about how to make creative use of their leisure time? Today in the States there is a new movement of independent boarding schools for deprived children to help bridge them into the future.

'Martin Luther King Jr. had asked us to organize a system of family placements for bright kids from the South to repeat Grade 12 while living in homes in greater New York, so that they could have a second chance to do well and gain university placement. This we did most successfully.

'I used to run seminars on "urban social change" for a week based at the house on 94 East 111th Street that covered most of the issues and used local resource people. Were we guilty of setting up a house to bring rich kids from outside slumming in the slums? I think not, but ...

'The role of non-violence: impact of Bayard, A.J., Dave, Ammon, Dorothy, etc. It felt right, more at home. One developed a commitment to alternatives in the Civil Rights Movements, the Peace Movement. The development of Satyagraha. I first met Martin Luther King in 1956. He issued an invitation to work in Montgomery, Alabama with the Improvement Association. But I was assigned to the AFSC for alternative service as a CO. The AFSC refused to release me to the Montgomery Improvement Association to go to Alabama. How different my life might have been if I had gone?

I wanted to participate in a major demonstration against nuclear testing. The strategies were examined in the FNDG. One was the voyage of the "Golden Rule". I volunteered to go, but I was rejected because I had a wife and child. David Gale who went got severely sea sick, causing immense problems and delays (they had to return across the Pacific to port in California to dismiss him).

'I did go to jail in 1958 (The Tombs, also written up in The Catholic Worker) for refusing, with others, to take shelter during an international air raid drill. My first wife bailed me out after 24 hours so that I could participate in the first March on Washington organized by Bayard Rustin from his new offices in Harlem (I had helped in the process). After further arrests and public denunciation (Governor Rockefeller's programme to build air raid shelters would not work in an atomic war) the drills were abandoned. The Supreme Court ruled in favour of the right to *not* take shelter.

'There was a court case that went to the Supreme Court and around 1959. The right to a passport, and the right to travel was established. It was no longer a "privilege" to be granted by people of the correct political views (I was one of 25 Americans who lost their passports between 1953 and 1959).

Sweden 1960:

'In 1959, after five years with the AFSC, I resigned and went to Putney, Vermont, as a student in what was then probably the smallest graduate school in the world, the Putney Graduate School of Teacher Education. It was run by an unusual Quaker, Morris Mitchell. It had no examinations, but each student developed a "portfolio" or "continuous file" on which he or she was assessed. Morris was interested in developing the "whole teacher in a divided world". A third to a half of the programme included study tours to Mexico, India, Sweden ("The Middle Way") or elsewhere. Our group planned a study tour to Sweden, USSR and Poland. We agreed to look at how different societies dealt with mental illness, juvenile delinquency, city planning, urban social change and the management of industries. It was a successful year. PGSTE was taken over by Antioch College in Ohio in 1964, and moved to Keene, New Hampshire, where it still exists in a new form today.

Conclusion:

‘There is not time today to continue with this exploration. People want to have lunch and are eager to go out into Lesotho on the planned tours. I have so far covered only parts of the first thirty years of my life. There are another forty years to go.

‘As I look back, what do these first chapters in my life now mean to me and my social witness? I would not be what I am if it had not been for Brooklyn Friends School and Swarthmore College. The five years with the AFSC were also critical in my development. This has been followed by nearly fifty years trying to live as a Friend, consistently encouraged by the love and support of others.

I am grateful for the opportunities I have had to be engaged, to be an activist, and perhaps to have had an impact on individuals, communities and society to help make a better world. I have tried to follow the path of the informed heart, of love and turning the other cheek.

‘Each of us in our own lives must make decisions on how we relate to others, to tensions and conflicts in our lives, those around us, wherever we live in the world. Not to do so is to let life pass us by. A social consciousness is something that each individual must strive to develop on his or her own. It is found by being involved. Without engagement it is difficult to learn and grow. To me it is still necessary to work with others, to be a traveller on the road less travelled. To seek what Quakers have called “the cutting edge”. To try and do what others are not doing, while seeking those who will join you in doing it. Life does not have to be a process of trial and error, a stumbling, though that may always be there as part of the unexpected or the serendipity as we develop and change. I believe it is possible to find a purpose to each of our lives.

‘Currently both individually and as a Meeting we are trying to face violence in Botswana. We recognize, following Geoff Harris’s lead (provided in last year’s Richard Gush Memorial Lecture published in SAQN 26 & 27, 2003), structural and cultural violence in the treatment of minorities in Botswana, particularly the San.

The Kagisano Society’s-Women’s Shelter Project is at the cutting edge. It runs the only women’s shelter in the country. In the last year and a half Botswana has experienced over hate murders involving couples (and therefore called “love killings” by the press - see SAQN, Number 25, 2002, p. 40). We are also speaking out and supporting others who do so about state murder and “Capital punishment?” We are concerned about the significant resources that go to the military. To kill or not to kill. As in the French film, we are all murderers when the State kills on our behalf.

Do the ends justify the means? Or do the wrong means corrupt the ends? Do we have tolerance for other views, of the right to dissent of others (not just ourselves)? It is hard to become a “true believer” without developing all the contractions and inconsistencies associated with being a true believer (Eric Hoffer). The world keeps changing, and we cannot remain rigid and inflexible. To be constantly open to change, to learning, and to re-assessing one’s position, is not easy.

‘Now at Easter we are all seeking renewal. May we continue our efforts for a better world, each in his or her own way, taking the steps that are necessary and right to them. Each little bit will come together to make a new whole. I would like to conclude with a quote from Martin Luther King Jr.

“The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy.

Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it.

Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie nor establish the truth.

Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate.

Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.

Darkness cannot overcome darkness; only light can do that.

Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”