

## GREENCOAT FORUM 9 March 2010

Many years ago, shortly before Indian independence, the North West Frontier was a comparatively peaceful place compared with the disorder and conflict in the rest of the country at the time. A friend of mine told Mahatma Gandhi about what was behind some of these developments. Apparently senior English officials had found a change of heart and apologized for their attitudes to the Indians with whom they were working. Blood feuds were being settled. The Mahatma was sceptical. But he had the story investigated and later told my friend that it was true. He then made the interesting comment, ‘ Politics has become like a great game of chess. Both sides know the value of the pieces and the moves to make. But when men’s motives and aims are changed, like these have been, the chessboard is upset and we can begin again.’

I see the role of forgiveness and repentance in that dimension. In the same way that our chief Rabbi, Lord Sacks, talks of forgiveness as ‘a stunningly original strategy’. ‘Forgiveness,’ he writes, ‘means that we are not destined endlessly to replay the grievances of yesterday. It is the ability to live with the past without being held captive by it. It represents our ability to change course, reframe the narrative of the past, and create an unexpected set of possibilities for the future.’

I would like this evening as well as talking about forgiveness and its meaning and significance also to sketch out how and why I come to be involved in the subject.

Much in my life goes back to three linked strands: my Irish family background, my evacuation to the United States at the age of eight, seventy years ago this year, and my visit to the centre of reconciliation at Caux, Switzerland at the age of 15.

My family lived for hundreds of years in Ireland, arriving in 1670. They were part of the Irish Protestant minority who dominated the Catholic majority. Over the years the family were landlords and many for generations also served in the Royal Irish Constabulary, the police. In fact I have an article in the current issue of *History Ireland* about one ancestor who is regarded as a founder of modern policing while his brother who emigrated to Canada is regarded by some as

that country's greatest traitor as he deserted to the Americans and led them in attacks on York as Toronto was then known. Some historians even blame him for the British burning of the White House in retaliation.

My grandfather like many Anglo-Irish served in the British Army and was wounded in France in World War I. I don't know exactly why, apart from his background, but at the time of Irish independence in 1922 he was told to leave Ireland by the end of the week or be shot. A family home was burned to the ground. My grandfather and my mother did, indeed, leave Ireland that week and that is why I am English.

This brings me to the second strand. My evacuation to America seventy years ago in 1940. As most of you will know at the outbreak of war, or actually on the day before the outbreak there was a mass evacuation of more than a million children out of cities where they might be bombed into what were regarded as less dangerous places. However, by the spring of 1940 there was a new and unexpected danger, that the Germans would invade Britain and a large overseas exodus was planned. Private overseas evacuation had begun as a trickle at the start of the war but it gradually became a political issue as the public was asking why only those who could afford to were going abroad. So in May 1940 the government introduced a scheme so that this option was open to everyone. Within two weeks more than 200,000 children were signed up to go to Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada and the United States.

Many motives played a part in parents being willing to send their children away. In my mother's case it was her memories of the troubles in Ireland with troops occupying her Dublin school and machine gun battles around her house. She wanted to get my brother and me out of the war zone and marched into the offices of shipping companies to find passages for us. So in August 1940 we embarked on a liner in a convoy escorted by a battleship and five destroyers. No wonder for some of us it was an adventure rather than a traumatic event. The overseas evacuation came to an end in September 1940 when the City of Benares was sunk and 77 children died.

For many those years overseas were a memorable adventure that changed the course of their lives but I won't dwell on it now. I have described it in my book 'See You After the Duration' which is what I called out to my parents as I left. It has a foreword by Sir Martin Gilbert who was also evacuated. That evacuation contributed to the next strand in my life.

When we returned to England in 1945 there were, as you can imagine, certain stresses after having been apart in this formative five years. It was hard for us to live into the lives of parents who had endured years of bombing, firewatching and quite recently the threat of V1s and V2s and would jump at any loud sounds. We didn't give as quick obedience to our father as he might have expected. Our parents' admonitions were met with, 'We don't do it that way in America, we don't do this, we don't do that.' In fact, pretty soon America became known in our family as 'we-land'.

So, partly in a desire to re-establish family unity, we decided in 1947 to visit the centre of reconciliation in Caux, Switzerland. As a fifteen-year-old I was persuaded to go when I learned that I could buy ice hockey skates four pounds cheaper in Switzerland than in England.

This centre had been set up the year before by Swiss who felt that as their country had been spared the ravages of the war they should provide a place where the hurts and hates of that war could be healed. It was in fact the first international conference where Germans were welcomed as equals and the French were soon coming in large numbers as well. In Doug Johnston's book 'Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft', its work in helping lay the groundwork for the unity between France and Germany that we now take for granted is very highly evaluated. In 1950 Frank Buchman, the American who inspired the setting up of this centre, was awarded the Legion of Honour by the French government and I was present two years later in India when he was similarly decorated by the German government.

Well, through honesty together we did find the unity we were looking for but we also as a family found a life's commitment to the ideas of Moral Re-Armament as it was then called, now Initiatives of Change.

One day to my mother's surprise an Irish Catholic Senator, Eleanor Butler, spoke. She was a member of the Council of Europe. Her words aroused all her suppressed feelings about what had happened. Who is this woman talking about unity in Europe and she chucked me out my country. But in the spirit of that place, which she had already imbibed, she felt she should apologize to Senator Butler for the indifference we had shown to Catholics over many years. She did so and they became friends and worked together.

Soon after her visit to Caux, Senator Butler said, 'I come from a nation of good haters. We enjoy feuds and we love fighting, almost for the fun of it. But in these last months I have had to do something I very much dislike. I have had to make some honest apologies for viewpoints which have divided instead of uniting me to other nations and other parts of my own nation. In every case new unity was born between myself and those from whom I had been separated.' She went on to become founder and first president of the Glencree Reconciliation Centre. My mother and Eleanor Butler have long since died but they would rejoice at the peace which has come to Northern Ireland. Incidentally, later in life my mother joined the Catholic church which meant a great deal to her.

Another woman who was there that summer at Caux provides inspiration and a resource for my writing and some of the lessons I draw on. I told her story at an international peace conference in Munich last month where many Germans were much moved.

Irene Laure was a nurse from Marseilles who had worked between the wars for international understanding and even had German children to stay in her home after the First World War. But when the Germans occupied her country during the Second World War she joined the underground resistance movement. She stayed with us some years back when we lived in Oregon in the United States, and told me that at the end of the war she wanted Germany eradicated from the map. Her son had been tortured and many of her comrades executed. Soon after the war she became a member of parliament and leader of the Socialist women.

She was invited to that Swiss conference and decided to accept as her children were malnourished and she looked forward to getting good food for them. It never crossed her mind that there would be

Germans there. When she heard German spoken and was told that a lot more Germans were expected she wanted to leave. But she was challenged by Buchman who said to her: 'How will you ever rebuild Europe without the Germans?'

She retired to her room and for several days and nights wrestled with the question whether she would give up her hatred for the sake of a new Europe. When she came out she asked if she could speak. She was given the chance to do so. She spoke of what she had been through and then turned to the Germans and said, 'Please forgive me for my hatred.' A German woman came up from the hall and took her outstretched hand. Irene said it felt like 100 kilos being lifted from her shoulders. She said later, 'At that moment I knew, I literally knew, that I was going to give the rest of my life to take this message of forgiveness and reconciliation to the world.'

Irene Laure and her husband were invited to go to Germany. For eleven weeks they crisscrossed the country addressing two hundred meetings, including ten of the eleven state parliaments. Everywhere she repeated her apology for her hatred. And everywhere Germans as a result were willing for the first time to face up to their past.

By chance we had corroboration of the power of her apology when soon after her visit we had Peter Petersen, a senior member of the German parliament, staying with us. It turned out that as a young man he had been in the hall in Caux that day when Irene spoke. I arranged for him to speak to the City Club, our leading public forum. He spoke powerfully in English and with great gratitude for the Americans and the audience was very much with him. Then just at the end of question time an old gentleman down front said, 'Mr Petersen. I see from your biography that at the end of the war you must have been 18 or 19. Will you please tell us: were you or were you not a member of the Nazi party.' The chairman told Peter he didn't need to answer. Peter said, 'I want to', and went to the microphone. 'At the end of the war I was convinced of only one thing,' he said. 'That the Allies had bigger bombs and bigger planes. I was still convinced Hitler was right and everyone else was wrong.'

Then he described how he had escaped from a British prisoner of war camp and come to his home. There he met a Jew who had survived the concentration camps and told him what it had been like.

Peter was shaken. He had thought until then that it was just British propaganda and he wanted to emigrate, anything to get away from being a German. His father persuaded him to stay and help with the economic recovery. Then he had been invited to this Swiss centre. And Irene's words did what no end of finger pointing and blame had done. He had been forced, as he told the City Club, to review his whole life. And in quiet he suddenly remembered an incident a few years earlier.

He has seen some emaciated people being herded from one cattle car to another and had said to his officer, 'Who are those people?' The officer replied, 'Oh, don't worry, they're just Poles and Jews.' And Peter hadn't worried and he suddenly realized the moral insensitivity in him that had made Hitler possible. But for the grace of God he could have been in the SS. He decided then to give his life to build a new kind of Europe and he did that faithfully over nearly sixty years often working with Irene. Peter said soon after hearing Irene's words, 'All my past rose up in revolt against the courage of this woman. I suddenly realized that there were things for which we, as individuals and nations, could never make restitution. We knew that she had shown us the only way open if Germany was to play a part in the reconstruction of Europe. The basis of a new Europe would have to be forgiveness.' When Peter died a few years back tribute was paid at his funeral to his untiring work to build bridges with the Jews and with Germany's former enemies.

Some people say that a person must apologize for his or her past before they can be forgiven. That is probably the more usual way. But in the example of Irene we see how an apology for hatred and a willingness to forgive can actually inspire the repentance in another person. And in the example of Peter we see that a person's past, whether good or bad, can if faced honestly be turned from a liability into an asset. Irene, freed from the bitterness nurtured by her experiences in the wartime underground, and Peter, honest about his teenage commitment to the Nazi party, found their pasts used to help build a different sort of society.

What had we as a family, and what had Irene and Peter met in Caux. A very simple but revolutionary idea. That if you want to bring

an answer to divisions in the world you need to start with yourself and your own country.

In 1996 I wrote a book to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that centre and its outreach to the world. I collected stories of reconciliations, some of them that I had personally witnessed at Caux or on missions to other countries. I was in the baggage team which met the some 70 senior Japanese, including the mayors of Nagasaki and Hiroshima who came to Caux in 1950 and then went from there to apologize in the US Senate and House of Representatives for the Japanese aggression at the start of World War II. I went to Hiroshima a few years later and saw the inscription the mayor had put on the memorial to the bomb. Not a sentence of blame, just, ‘Sleep in peace we shall not make the same mistake again.’ I was an interpreter from German into English when leaders of the Italian and German speaking people of South Tyrol came and laid the foundations for the peace that has since continued. The Catholic bishop told me, ‘I noticed a change in the South Tyroleans and the Italian politicians after their return from Caux. They said things I had never heard them say before.’ I met countless individuals who initiated all sorts of bold moves whether in the resolution of divisions in Morocco or Australian attitudes to its Aborigines or white attitudes to African Americans in the South of the United States. And as we looked for a title to the book it became clear that it should be *The Forgiveness Factor*.

I suppose in many ways that is not surprising because the whole work of Initiatives of Change is founded on an experience of asking for forgiveness by its initiator, Frank Buchman, a Christian minister. A hundred years ago he was in charge of a hostel for young boys in a poor part of Philadelphia. He felt he was not being given enough money by the directors to feed the boys properly. He resigned and became very bitter. He travelled to Europe but, as he said, he carried his bitterness with him. In a church in England he was faced in a sermon by the fact that the six directors may have been wrong but he was the seventh wrong man. He sent letters of apology and that very day found he was able to help a younger person in need. It was the start of his lifetime’s work.

The publication of *The Forgiveness Factor* led to my being asked to write two more books about the subject *Forgiveness: Breaking the Chain of Hate* and more recently *No Enemy to Conquer*. So I don't come to the subject from academic study but from first hand knowledge of people who have started with themselves. I don't put forward a particular theology or a set of rules although I know that for some that is important. I put forward an experience that is available to all.

When this latest book came out, I said to the distributor, 'I have only one condition, that you read it first. She did so and came back to me. 'This is forgiveness with teeth,' she said. I like that. Not very elegant but very appropriate. Because forgiveness sometimes has an image problem. People can think it is something soft, that it means forgoing justice, or letting people get away with murder, or forgetting an evil. I want to show that forgiveness is not that. Of course we need justice. People have to face the consequences of their acts. But forgiveness brings in a new dimension.

For those of us of Christian conviction, forgiveness of course lies at the heart of our faith. We pray the Lord's Prayer regularly, 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others who trespass against us.' We are urged to forgive not just seven times but seventy times seven. But we are wrong to suggest, as some Christians do, that forgiveness is unique to the Christian faith. We may define the requirements and nature of forgiveness differently but forgiveness is one of the few concepts which like love are respected and encouraged by all the world's religions. It is why I include essays by senior Jewish, Muslim and Hindu leaders in the book. Forgiveness can be a meeting place and a source of teamwork between faiths. I was glad that an earlier launch of *No Enemy to Conquer* was chaired by a Muslim imam and he shared the platform with a Jewish rabbi and Christian leaders.

I see forgiveness in terms of embarking on a journey. 'No Enemy To Conquer' is above all about journeys, journeys sometimes taken alone, sometimes taken with others. Forgiveness for some may be the start of that journey, for some it may be the destination at the end, for most it is the decisions,



often renewed as we falter, that are made along the way. It was indeed the start of a journey for our family.

Let me tell you about two friends of mine in Nigeria who are on that journey. This West African country is on the front lines of Christian Muslim relations. These two militant religious terrorists – that's what they were called – now are working together for a change in society. Muhammad Ashafa is a Muslim Imam, James Wuye is a Christian pastor in Kaduna. Earlier in the nineties they had fought against each other during an uprising in the city. And tried to kill each other. A Muslim extremist sliced off James' hand as he was protecting his church and Christian extremists killed Muhammad's uncle thinking he was Muhammad as well as his brothers and his spiritual adviser.

They met at a conference in the Governor's house in Kaduna and it was suggested that the two men might have a part in bringing healing. They found in the Bible and in the Koran passages which showed common approaches. They saw their survival as a sign from God and set up an organisation to encourage dialogue. Real friendship, however, was slower to come. When they began travelling together, even sharing a room, Pastor James was sometimes tempted to carry a pillow to suffocate the imam when he was sleeping. Each time he wanted to retaliate for his hand. It took Pastor James three years to overcome his hatred. The fact that when his mother was in hospital the imam and his friends visited her helped him to see the imam differently.

Now whenever violence breaks out they go together to the affected quarter to calm the tempers and contribute to solutions. The Archbishop of Canterbury calls them 'a model for Christian Muslim relations'. A powerful film of their experience is now available (and we have the producer here today?). It is already out in eight languages including Arabic and the Hebrew and Sinhala versions will be ready soon. When I was in Melbourne it was featured at the Parliament of the World's Religions. I believe the DVD is being offered at half price today with every copy of my new book.

Now let me give you some news that has just come in. A friend of mine was watching Al Gezira English news at one o'clock today reporting on the killings in the Jos area. He emailed me: 'As part of that report, first pastor James and then imam Ashafa spoke to the camera for about 45 seconds each, giving their strong message of reconciliation from Jos: armed protection is one thing, but most needed is a change of heart in people, an end to the preaching of hate, and a communal debate rooted on issues rather than ethnicity, and much else of strong impact. Interfaith Mediation Centre was printed below their names in turn.'

When I was embarking on *No Enemy to Conquer* I noticed a short little news item one day in the papers. It said that Sunni and Shia leaders from Iraq were coming to Europe to learn about peacemaking. And who did it say were they going to learn that from: Protestants and Catholics from Northern Ireland and black and white leaders from South Africa. What amazing changes we have seen in our lifetime. Indeed, it is the fact that Nelson Mandela could come out after 27 years in prison without the motivation of revenge and the effect on the country that has helped many in political life to take the idea of forgiveness more seriously. No one 25 years ago would have dreamt that the country could get to where it has without civil war and a bloodbath. Mandela's attitude, very powerfully portrayed in the film *Invictus*, and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission under Archbishop Tutu, have shown us that forgiveness far from being just a personal or religious matter can affect the life of nations. It is a dramatic expression of Gandhi's word I quoted about the chess board being upset so we can start again.

But of course, as in every step forward, one cannot relax and think the work is done. Healing has to be continually fostered. That is why I tell the story of two friends in South Africa where not every black has forgiven and every white has certainly not owned up to responsibility for an apartheid society. A spirit of forgiveness has to be constantly renewed. Letlapa Mphahlele and Ginn Fourie are an example of that process. Ginn is a white South African who lost her

daughter in what was called the Heidelberg Tavern massacre. Later she was reconciled with Letlapa who was responsible for the massacre. In 1993 he was the South African government's most wanted terrorist. 'If I had met him then,' she says, 'I could have killed him with my bare hands.' She says now, 'It's not that I don't feel a great sadness of losing my daughter, but forgiving her killer has made it bearable and given me a creative way forward. We are good friends, not enemies. Letlapa has told me that in forgiving him I have restored his humanity.' I was with Ginn last summer at Caux.

I read something else startling in a paper just last month. Martin McGuinness described Ian Paisley as his friend. It is exciting to see the Gandhi chessboard upset in Northern Ireland, a place that was often held up as a reproach to Christians. Many elements have had a part, including the war weariness on all sides and little appetite for a return to violence.

It has not been achieved principally through forgiveness or repentance though that has had a significant part, given a real stimulus by actions like that of Gordon Wilson after the Omagh bombing and a proliferation of men and women on sides who have been working for reconciliation, reaching out to the other, both sides working and praying together. It has been achieved through dramatic changes of attitude in hard-line protestants and catholics, through political initiatives, with persistence from the British, Irish and American governments and the help of US Senator George Mitchell. However, the political agreements, if they are to be sustained, will need forgiveness more than ever, and the undergirding of men and women who can build relationships that contribute to trust between the communities and heal the deep bitternesses of the past that remain. As Mitchell liked to say, the decommissioning of weapons has to be accompanied by the decommissioning of mindsets.

I was at a meeting in the House of Commons a few months back. It was the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attempt by the Irish Republican Army to blow up the British government. (It was arranged by Marina Cantacuzino and her Forgiveness Project. She is with us tonight) The speakers were Jo Berry and Pat Magee. Jo's father, a Member of Parliament and the uncle of Princess Diana, was killed by the bomb that destroyed Brighton's Grand Hotel. He could

only be identified by his signet ring. Pat was the man who set the bomb. He was caught and spent many years in prison before being released as a result of the Good Friday accord. Jo wanted to bring something positive out of the tragedy and believes that she had a choice to stay as a victim blaming others for her pain or go on a journey of healing. She has been meeting with Pat, and they have been hearing each other's story as they put it and Jo says that she realizes that if she had grown up in the circumstances he did she might well have gone down the road of violence. They do not agree on everything but it has been important for her to see Pat as a real human being rather than a demonized terrorist as pictured in the media. Pat has gone so far as to say that he is sorry that he killed Jo's father and is open to the possibility that one of his victims might one day persuade him that what he did was wrong. The two have joined up with other groups working for reconciliation. At the end of this month the two of them will be speaking together at Saint James', Piccadilly, the church where 25 years ago, two days after the blast, she prayed to God, 'Please, somehow, could I find a way to deal with my pain and also end up with a way to help.'

It is good to know that on the BBC news tonight it was reported that the Northern Ireland Assembly in an overwhelming vote backed the final phase of devolution.

One element which has helped in the Irish situation was the apology to the Irish by Prime Minister Blair. He was much criticized for doing so. But as Donald Shriver, author of *An Ethic for Enemies* and other important books on the subject of nations facing up to their past, writes, 'Who can doubt that the apology of Prime Minister Tony Blair for British irresponsibility in the 1840s over the Irish Famine was another increment of the healing of memories between the two peoples.' Acknowledgment, even as much as apology, is vital to us moving forward in many parts of the world. That is why President Obama's speech in Cairo was so important. It represented a brave and thoughtful attempt to acknowledge centuries of disrespect and humiliation of Islam by the Christian West. It resonated in the Muslim world because it showed detailed understanding of past wrongs and a desire to put these right and a detailed appreciation of some of the great contributions to the world by Muslims. Those in a

conflict may not agree on a common narrative, but each side's compulsion to fight, to get even, seems to be greatly lessened if each feels his story has been heard and understood.

It is very easy to make fun of apologies and write them off as caving in to political correctness. Though criticism does not come usually from the recipients. Unless it is inadequate or insincere. The ground for apologies has to be prepared carefully and be done at an appropriate time. I had an experience of that when I lived in Oregon. We had been following the work of Hope in the Cities which has underlined the importance of an honest look at our history. It has done some groundbreaking work in Richmond, Virginia, once the capital of the Confederacy in the Civil War. I participated in its walk through history seventeen years ago.

We realized as we wondered what might be our equivalent in Oregon that 1999 was actually the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of legislation excluding blacks from Oregon. It was repealed later but it nurtured a culture of exclusion in the state and is a history which was known to few. With careful preparation we were able to have a wonderful occasion that year in the Oregon Legislature when the leaders of the state in a memorable ceremony formally recognized Oregon's racial history. I remember one African American saying afterwards, 'At last our story has been told.' And the material we prepared went to the historical society and became a resource for schools. Just last month I received an email from Portland that teachers of social studies were required now to participate in professional development sessions on *Beyond the Oregon Trail*, the curriculum we helped develop.

In South Africa as we know the leadership came from the top. In Australia, we have seen how, when the government blocked efforts to repair relations with its Aboriginal people, its intransigence fuelled a grassroots movement for change. I was there in Australia on national sorry day and saw the sorry books which gathered a million signatures offering apologies. After more than ten years of struggle what a moving sight it was two years ago in the Australian Parliament when the new prime minister, Kevin Rudd, with the support of the Opposition finally offered the government's apology for the way the Aboriginal

populations had been treated. (We have with us today John Bond who was secretary of the Sorry Day committee)

I think by now it must be clear that forgiveness is a very involved subject and one can only touch on a few angles. No doubt many will have questions or thoughts to contribute.

I think it has been an advantage to me that I have come to the subject the way I have, through the examples of people who have decided to start with themselves and who have accepted that we need to mirror in our own lives the qualities we want to see lived by our opponents. The native Americans say that before judging someone we should be ready to walk a mile in their moccasins. Jo is doing that with Pat. In the same way that Pastor James has sought out common areas of faith with Imam Ashafa and the Irish are building on the shared humanity and desire for peace of the Catholic and Protestant communities. It is the readiness to take the first step without expecting that the other is ready to step forward in the same spirit. Irene could have said that the Germans were more guilty than she but she began with her own hate. Rajmohan Gandhi, the Mahatma's grandson who is now chair of Initiatives of Change, says, 'When you see a wrong being done, do something about it, but also consider whether you share some responsibility for it. Fight but begin the search with yourself.'

When I was a teenager I worked backstage on Broadway. For one production we had a huge cyclorama backdrop to represent the sky. Before the performance the fire inspector came to make sure all our equipment had been fireproofed. He took up the cyclorama, pushed a little bit of it through his fingers and then struck a match and tried to set it on fire. And it was not just a bit from the edge, it was the middle of the expensive material. It was an anxious moment. Fortunately it withstood the test. It had been fireproofed. I like to think that in a way the challenge before us in the world is not to work on fireproofing but on hateproofing society. As our world is becoming more open and people are more knowledgeable about each other and each other's past, we have to work on protecting its fabric. Today every perceived grievance or unhealed atrocity from the past is not only headlined but immediately flashed

round the world and, it would seem, is googleable in perpetuity. Just as we had to fireproof a cyclorama, and it would have been costly if we had not done so, we need to hateproof our communities. And forgiveness and repentance are powerful tools in that trust-building work. And it is welcome news that so far the majority of people in Northern Ireland are hateproofed enough not to rise to the bait of recent attacks and provocations.