GUEST COLUMN

A glimpse of heaven

by John Burrows

The performance was over. The cast had taken their final curtain call. The stage was dark, save for a few dimly lit music stands. Outside the theatre, an excited crowd abuzz with all they had seen and heard, was heading for home—by car and taxi, by subway or through the narrow city streets. London's Mermaid Theatre was making preparations to close down for the night.

As the audience departed, a sextet of jazz musicians extemporized riffs on Cole Porter's song, 'What is this thing called love?' And, as every night, a handful of patrons steadfastly refused to yield to the night air until they had drained their last drop of musical pleasure. The Mermaid's current production was the popular revue *Cole* and these late-night hangers-on were the hard-core fans.

'That's why I ask the Lord, in heaven above, what is this thing called love?'—the big build-up, the final chord, a quiet roar of appreciation.

Transfixed

I closed the musical score. Behind me, a small, elderly lady stood transfixed to the spot, seemingly unaware that tonight's *Cole* was a thing of the past.

'Did you enjoy the show?' I asked.

'Oh yes,' she said, 'and so did Edie!'

I saw no one with her. Not a little nervously, I enquired, 'Where is Edie?'

'She's there,' she replied, pointing to a shadowy figure in the last row of seats. 'She's asked me to tell you something. She wants you to know that she can leave her house again. Her husband died a year ago. From that day to this, Edie hasn't been out. Not until tonight... Somehow, I persuaded her to come with me to see *Cole*. And she wants *you* to know that she can go out again.'

Since this interchange, almost a quarter of a century ago, I've often reminded myself of Edie's changed life. (Those of us who are full-time professional musicians rarely hear stories like Edie's.) And I've wondered how many lives might have been transformed by similar experiences.

We all have our 'Edie' moments. A painting, a movie, a stained-glass window, a building, a voice—sights and sounds that change the direction of our lives. Transcendent experiences, that without a second's forethought seem to bring us face to face with the Great Creator. Edie's miracle—new-found confidence after the loss of her husband—may in the end be distilled down to a bus ride into town. For Edie, it was a glimpse of heaven itself.

I cannot imagine why God chose Cole Porter as his vehicle to help that lady on that night. Had her friend taken Edie to Verdi's Requiem or Beethoven's Choral Symphony, this anecdote might on the face of it seem more profound. The truth is that Cole Porter's songs could be—intentionally—frivolous; and he was no saint. By no stretch of the imagination can he be regarded as a spiritual leader. He did not even lead a conventionally moral life. But allow *this* possibility for a moment: he believed he had been born to entertain the world, to take us 'out of ourselves'. And put like that, his life might begin to take on another dimension.

> **'Great artists come in awkwardly shaped packages.'**

Great artists come in awkwardly shaped packages. Their mundane lives stubbornly resist elevation to the quality of their art. Those who are living among us today are often regarded as an out-of-touch, uncompromising, insignificant bunch—much as their predecessors were over the centuries. Although we'd like them to, they don't, or won't, conform to our likes and dislikes. 'Good taste' and 'popular appeal' they may regard as their natural enemies.

We may feel we need art that inspires, not depresses, something we can 'understand'. And if artists can't give us that, we demote them to the level of 'useless people'—an epithet used by his contemporaries to describe Mozart. But, like it or not, great artists cannot be made to compromise their work to suit our tastes, *and* continue to produce great art.

A composer's music may 'last too long', 'give us a headache', or 'not have a decent tune in it', but if the hand of God has touched it, we are wasting our time requiring him or her to conform to our puny and limited imaginations. The Nazis tried it. So did the Soviets. And we look back on their efforts as among the more futile in history.

Dichotomy

Hugh Steadman Williams, playwright and one of a band of artists currently working within the ranks of Moral Re-Armament, tries to resolve this dichotomy in his brilliant *Theology of encouragement for the artist*. He reminds his readers of the opening of St John's first epistle: 'We have heard it. We have seen it with our own eyes. We looked upon it and felt it with our own hands. Our theme is the Word which gives life.'

He goes on: 'The supreme task of the artist is to be the bridge between earth and heaven, to mediate the spiritual through the material, so that in generations to come people will say, "We have heard it through music, through poetry; we have seen it through painting, sculpture, photography or film; we have felt it through ceramics, textiles or carving." The Word made accessible and available, through paint and bronze and catgut and celluloid, through clay, thread and wood. When we create and communicate with love we are acting in the image of God. Art needs no other justification.'

'What is this thing called love?' Maybe *this* is! For when man mirrors God's supremely loving act of creation with the same love with which he created us, we might catch that glimpse of heaven that Edie caught on her bus ride into town.

We might be transformed.

John Burrows is an English-born freelance conductor, based in New York City. He has been Music Director for many shows in London's West End and, in 1983, co-founded the Lyric Opera of Dallas.

NEXT ISSUE

Lead story: *For A Change* reports on an initiative to train young central and east Europeans in the values that undergird democracy.

Profile: Kenyan diplomat Bethuel Kiplagat

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Healing history • Transforming relationships • Building community

FOR A CHANGE

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August/September 2000

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- Norway's role in debt relief
- Musician's 'glimpse of heaven'

Mary McAleese

Ireland's President

A VOICE OF CONTRADICTION

by John Everington, Damascus

Syria re-discovered

Syria has been little visited by Western tourists in comparison with other Middle Eastern states such as Egypt, Jordan and Israel. However after a period of isolation during the Seventies and most of the Eighties visitors from abroad are starting to re-discover a land rich in culture with an impressive archaeological legacy.

'Who's who' of civilizations

The people of the capital, Damascus, claim that it is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. There is evidence of settlement in the region as far back as the 4th millennium BC, and the city has been occupied by a veritable 'Who's who' of great civilizations, including the Babylonians, Hittites, Romans, Byzantines, Abbasids, Mongols and most recently Ottoman Turks, who captured Syria in 1516 and occupied it until 1918.

Bath houses and scouring pads

One aspect of Turkish social life that remains today is the *hammam* or bathhouse, popular with both locals and tourists. One sits for a few hours in a steam-filled room meditating on life, the universe and the ice-cold water which that naughty kid just threw at you, after which you are washed with an abrasive cleaner (an oven glove with the surface of a scouring pad which removes several layers of skin) and receive the attention of a masseur. My friends and I were unsure whether his job was to give a nice relaxing massage or to twist his victim's limbs in ways hitherto unimaginable.

Souqs and spices

When I was living in the old city last autumn, every day I would see groups of tourists flocking to see the bustling *souqs* or markets, filled with spices, carpets, gold and other exotic items, being welcomed by merchants promising 'to make for you the special price'. Thankfully most tourists have started to learn the ancient art of bargaining, which is almost expected in everyday commerce, not only for gold and carpets, but also for standard items and even luxury hotel rooms!

Religious heritage

The old quarter of Damascus contains Straight Street and the House of Ananias, two very important sites in early Christianity, as well as the Umayyad Mosque, one of the most sacred sites in Islam after Mecca, Medina, and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

Outside of the capital, the spectacular Roman ruins of Palmyra, situated in the middle of the Syrian desert, and Krak de Chevaliers, one of the best preserved Crusader castles anywhere in the Middle East, are just two sites which tourists are starting to make for every spring. Despite the Crusades, Syria's 10 per cent Christian minority lives comfortably with the Muslim majority.

Getting wired

During a recent technology conference Dr Bashar al-Assad (now President following the death of his father, President Hafez al-Assad) stated his desire that every home in Syria should have Internet access. There is some way to go, however. Internet cafés (official and unofficial) have emerged over the year, although the service is still slightly restricted. Public telephone boxes (practically the only way to make national and international calls) were only introduced around three years ago. Mobile phones were introduced earlier this year, though with phones retailing at around $200 and a connection fee of over $1,000, only a very small élite can afford them. But let us not forget that until relatively recently this was the case in the rest of the world as well.

Warmth of welcome

Western visitors to Syria are continually astounded by the warmth and friendliness shown to them by the local population, a characteristic that sadly is rarely mentioned in the Western media. I've lost count of the number of times my classmates and I were invited by complete strangers to share Arab coffee, spiced with cardamom, or a *nargileh*, the water pipe smoked by the caterpillar in *Alice in Wonderland*. I was especially touched when my Muslim neighbours invited me in to their homes during the Islamic festival of Id al-Adha, even though they knew full well that I was a Christian.

DAMASCUS
EUROPE

Paper wait

This relaxed attitude is also prevalent at most levels of political, social and academic life. On the day of our first exam in the Faculty of Arts in the University of Damascus we were told that it had been delayed by half an hour. When we casually asked why, we were told that the paper was still being written! ■

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Cover: Irish President Mary McAleese Photo: John Cogill, Associated Press

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

The power of silence

At the heart of MRA's annual conferences in Caux, Switzerland, which have been running through July and August, is a belief that each person can make a difference to the world, through a transforming experience of liberation in their lives and through their interaction with others.

The human spirit longs for liberation, not just economic and political liberation, important as these are, but also inner liberation from the down-drag of base instincts: hate, bitterness, greed and lust which all too easily enslave us.

People long to 'be themselves'—to have a sense of worth and purpose in life; to be able to contribute of their time and talents; to know that they are needed and loved. But 'being ourselves' requires a recognition that we are first and foremost spiritual, not just economic or material, beings. In an age of information (and often information overload) there is a primary source of 'information'—that of the still, small voice within, that Christians would call the Holy Spirit, which comes from God and empowers us.

To receive this 'information' requires time, space and silence, free from the tyranny of deadlines or 'the next thing to do'. Not the 'festering silence' of fear and resentment to which Irish President McAleese refers (see page 12). Rather, the silence to ponder and reflect, which she welcomes and advocates, and which draws on the wellsprings of wisdom, insight and love for others.

Of course it is possible to fool ourselves—to hear voices of delusion and self-interest, to succumb to peer pressure and the spirit of the age. For wisdom to be authentic, there have to be checks and balances—moral standards of honesty, purity, selflessness and love for others—which guide our motives. We need the wisdom of the scriptures and the advice of trustworthy friends and clerics.

But first and foremost it is in silence, and in prayer, that we grow as individuals, and become empowered to change the world. As St James put it: 'Those who look closely into the perfect law that sets people free, who keep on paying attention to it and do not simply listen then forget it, but put it into practice—they will be blessed by God in what they do.'

Michael Smith

Volume 13 No 4 *August/September 2000*

FOR A CHANGE

- closes the circle between faith and action, action and faith. It is for anyone, anywhere, who wants to make a difference to the world.

FOR A CHANGE believes

- that in a world torn by ancient hatreds, the wounds of history can be healed.
- that in the family and the workplace, relationships can be transformed.
- that in urban jungle or rural backwater, community can be built.
- that peace, justice and the survival of the planet depend on changes in attitudes as well as structures.

FOR A CHANGE

- draws its material from a wide range of sources and was born out of the experience of Moral Re-Armament.

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A NOTE ON MORAL RE-ARMAMENT

Moral Re-Armament was launched in 1938 when Europe was rearming. Frank Buchman, MRA's American initiator, called for a programme of 'moral and spiritual rearmament' to address the root causes of conflict, and work towards a 'hate-free, fear-free, greed-free world'. Since then people of all backgrounds and traditions have been active in this programme on every continent.

MRA is open to all. Its starting point is the readiness of each person to make real in their own life the changes they wish to see in society. A commitment to search for God's will in daily life forms the basis for creative initiative and common action. Absolute moral standards of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love help to focus the challenge of personal and global change.

LEAD STORY

Corbis

Statue of Skanderberg in Kruja, the mountain town and ancient capital of Albania

Albania begins to see daylight

Paul Williams looks for signs of hope in a country that has suffered more than most.

'If I were God,' said the young Catholic priest from the Netherlands (two years in Albania and mastering the language), 'I would admit them all to heaven straight away. They have suffered so much.'

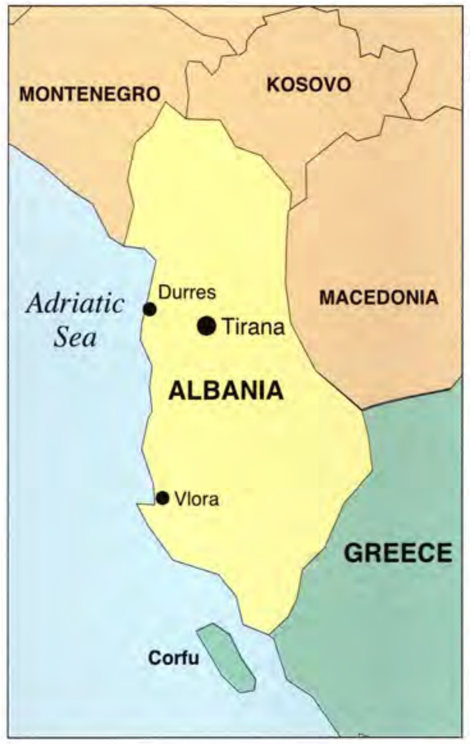
At first this might seem a somewhat odd comment, considering Albania's well-earned reputation for violence, corruption and crime, but as you look closer and listen to people's stories, you can see what he means. The marks of suffering—whether physically with the pot-holed roads and the near 700,000 concrete military bunkers that scar the countryside, or spiritually and psychologically in the people—are all too evident.

Of the European countries, Albania endured the darkest experience of communist rule. Party leader Enva Hoxha (pronounced Hodger) was a Stalinist who took his atheism seriously. In 1967, having grown impatient with the slowness of his brutal attempts to repress and control remaining adherents to the country's Muslim and Christian faiths, he declared Albania an atheist state. All mosques and churches were destroyed or put to other use.

Hoxha died in 1985 after 40 years of iron rule, but his malign influence lived on. It was not until 1992 that Albania had its first non-communist government—making it the last of the East European countries to shake off the system. Starting recovery late, and with years of isolation and neglect to overcome, it has left Albania with the unwanted tag of Europe's poor relation.

Enver Hoxha's long 'leadership' was only the most recent misfortune to befall a country whose history reveals a whole series of invasions and set-backs. For hope and a sense of nationhood, they look back to the time when national hero Skanderberg held up the invading Turkish armies to give the country a brief spell of unity from 1444-66. There followed centuries of Ottoman rule until Albania declared independence in 1912. Mussolini's Italy invaded in 1939—ruling Albania for 4 years. The Italians were followed by the Germans, whose defeat opened the way for Hoxha's partisans to seize power.

In 1997, just as things seemed to be finally taking off democratically and economically, the country was hit by the pyramid savings financial crisis. The loss of confidence was so great as people lost their savings, that law and order broke down, production was halted and there were guns in everyone's hands. President Berisha, who had led the opening to democracy and western Europe, was swept aside and the Socialist Party (former communists) elected back into office. Only at the beginning of 1999 did recovery start to get underway again—and then Albania had to cope (generously as it turned out) with looking after 450,000 ethnic Albanian refugees from neighbouring Kosovo.



Philip Carr

'Unless you have lived under a communist dictatorship, you'll never understand what it was like,' says Bardhyl Fico, former Secretary of State for Religious Affairs in the Berisha government. His father had been Foreign Minister of Albania in the 1930s. 'It's like a person trying to tell you what it was like undergoing an operation without anaesthetic. You hear what he says but your body has not experienced it.'

Fico's adopted daughter, Vali, was snatched from them one night when she was 16 and taken away, alone, to the work camps. She had been two years old when her natural parents were forced to flee without her and the Ficos had taken her in and brought her up as their own. Something her refugee parents had said or done abroad had drawn attention to her. 'I didn't suffer as much as so many did,' reflects Fico, 'but, like the vast majority, I was oppressed. You were afraid to speak in a foreign language in case they thought you were a spy. Just talking to foreigners could land you in prison.'

Fico is a Muslim, the majority faith (70 per cent) in Albania. (The Autonomous Greek Orthodox Church of Albania claims 20 per cent and the Roman Catholics 10 per cent.) He refuses to be disheartened by Albania's present difficulties or painful past. 'We are great survivors,' he says. 'We are one of the oldest peoples in Europe. Our language is unique, unrelated to any other. We have hung on for centuries and I have no fears about the new century.'

He also feels Albania has a unique role as

Associated Press

Kosovar Albanians fleeing from Serbia in March 1999.

Arne Hodalic/ Corbis

About one fifth of Albania's land is arable.

a bridge between east and west. 'We are one of the very few countries in Europe with a Muslim majority. Over the years Muslims in Albania have developed a tolerance and even love of our Christian brothers. This has been heightened by our common experience of persecution. In this sense Albania can send an important message to the world.'

Sokol Mirakaj is not so optimistic. A Catholic working in the Prime Minister's Office, he is a member of the four-strong State Committee for Religions. He has spent a total of 42 years in the prison camp system. It was there that he met and married Vali, the Ficos' adopted daughter who had been so abruptly dragged from them in the night. Their three children were born in the camps. 'The struggle of our family has been for faith and for freedom,' he tells me. His grandfather proclaimed independence for his region of Puka in 1911—a year before Albania as a whole took that historic step. His father was exiled by King Zog in the 1930s and later led the last non-communist partisan group to hold out against Enver Hoxha. Mirakaj was two when he entered the prison camps. He was released in 1990.

'In prison, hope for the future kept me alive,' he says. 'But the kind of freedom I dreamed of during all those years was not what we have today.' He cannot bring himself to trust the former communists, however much they say they have changed their spots. 'Albania desperately needs to be led by unselfish people who love their country, not by those who want to fill their pockets.' He sees no hope that things will change or that such a leadership will emerge. Similar pessimism is widespread and there is no denying that the numbers leaving or wanting to leave Albania are huge.

So where is hope to be found? I discovered part of the answer in a village in Fush Kruja, nestling below the ancient hill capital of Kruja. There Astrit Kaloshi and his wife Vaselika run a cheese factory. They come from the Greek Orthodox tradition. Their daughter, who has found a strong faith in God's leading, suggested that the factory be called Sky Light—'because of the light that comes from heaven'. When the flood of Kosovar refugees began to flow into Albania last year, Kaloshi offered a house he had been preparing for other purposes to accommodate a group of 40 he had found wandering aimlessly on the road. The women slept in the house, the men in tents in the garden. The Kaloshis provided them with cheese, and local farmers with milk and other produce. 'We didn't want money from them. They had nowhere to go. It was the least we could do,' he says. Their act of generosity was duplicated many times all over Albania.

The Sky Light factory is at the centre of a growing network of local farmers who sell their milk to the Kaloshis. Recently they have linked up with the Dutch partners of an international project—Heifer Project International—which helps provide poor farmers with quality imported cows to increase milk production. Kaloshi administers the scheme in Fush Kruja. He procures enriched feed concentrate and sells it on to his farmers at cost. He also takes in low milk-producing cattle and 'nurses' them back to full health. Last year there were 30 small farmers in the scheme, today there are 152—all with increased earnings and seeing their small-holdings prosper.

Paul Williams

Ledio and Nahlel Bejleiri: 'tradition of religions working together'

Kaloshi says similar groups are starting up in other areas. He has recently been elected President of the Cattle Breeding Association of Albania. 'I get hope from the farmers,' he says. 'My message to them has been not to put their trust in get-rich-quick schemes, nor in some government minister, but in their own hard work. The small farmer is cautious, but if he sees something is working he will want to be part of it.' Vaselika adds, 'We have begun to construct a milk industry here. At the most difficult and dangerous moments, God has helped us beyond our imagination.' Kaloshi's next ambitious project, for which he is looking for international help, is to start a National School of Business and Enterprise.

Another who thinks he can see a turning of the tide is Lebanese businessman Pierre Semaan. He is Commercial Director of Seament Albania in the town of Elbasan. His company produces and imports cement. 'In the anarchy of 1997 the factory was closed for eight months,' he says. Half a million dollars' worth of goods and equipment were stolen. But the firm decided to keep faith with the workers by continuing to pay their salaries throughout. 'Today we employ 580 and are about to invest another $6 million to increase the factory's capacity. Business has begun picking up since early 1999.'

He is also Treasurer of FIAA—the Foreign Investors Association of Albania. It draws together all private sector foreign investors, with banks and international agencies having affiliated status. He says Telnord, a Norwegian-Greek collaboration, have just outbid all competitors for a big mobile phone contract. Also the port at Durres is in line for major World Bank aided development, including a new container terminal. 'If we can cut down the red tape and if stability is maintained, things look promising,' he says.

He is, of course, looking into the future. For the moment what Albanians see is that unemployment is unacceptably high and public sector wages, including those of doctors, lecturers and teachers, discouragingly low. In a lighter moment, and referring to their love of coffee bars (which are everywhere in Tirana), one politician remarked that of Albania's three million plus population, around half were engaged in drinking coffee and the other half in serving it!

But hope is also to be found, if not among school leavers (many of whom feel trapped and without prospects), then in the generation just above them. 'People are gradually learning to move away from reliance on "the big leader",' says Petrit Kokobobo, a businessman in his early forties. 'Ten years of democracy is a very short time. Our generation has a new European mentality. New ideas are being generated. The graph is upward.'

Richard Channer

Astrit and Vaselika Kaloshi with the cows they are treating

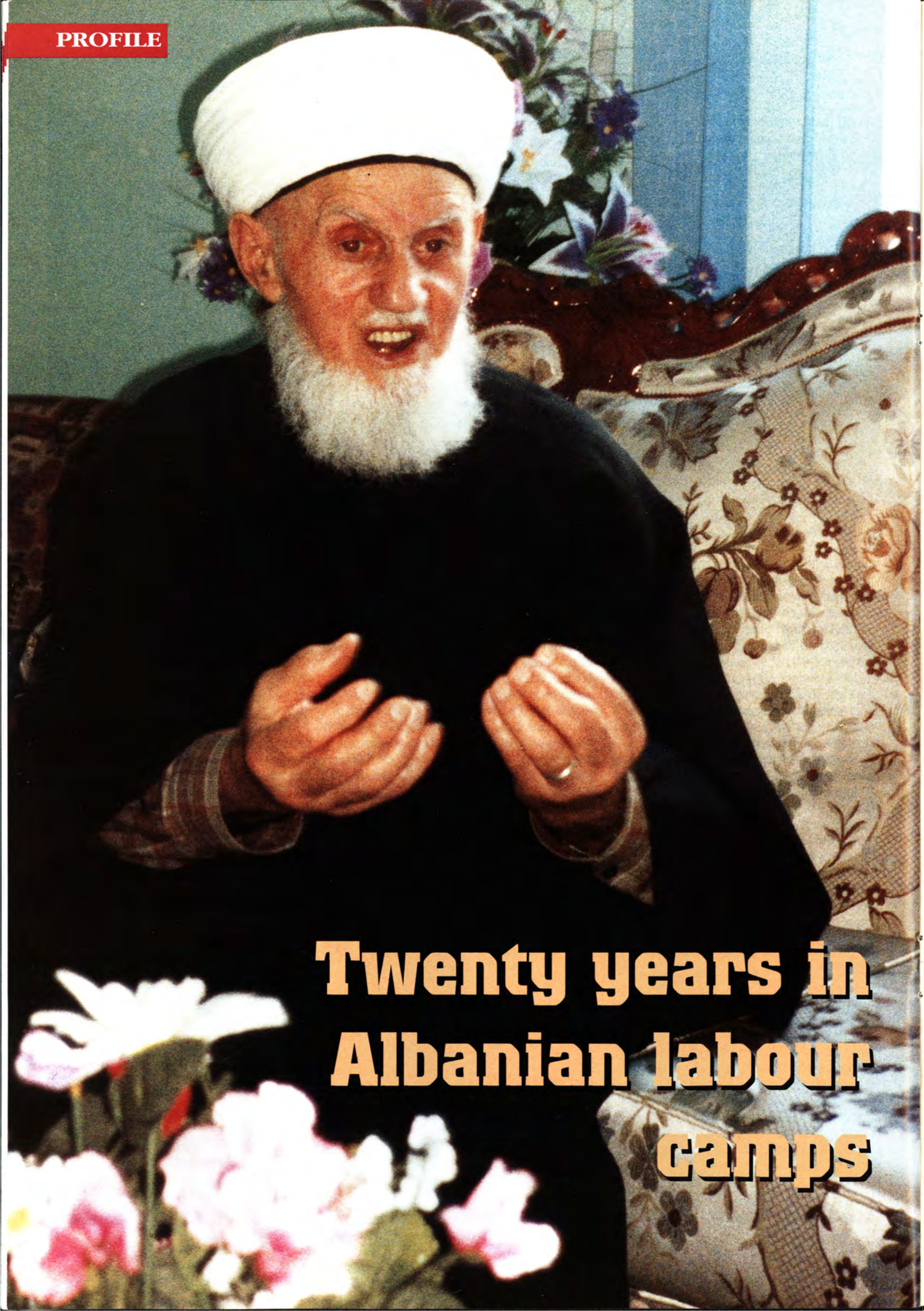
'I do get tempted to look for higher paid jobs abroad,' says 29-year-old Dr Neli Demi, Resident in Psychiatry at the Mother Teresa University Hospital Centre in Tirana. 'But somehow I find myself always looking for excuses to stay. I suppose it's really because I love the place and want to contribute something.'

Bardhyl Fico's daughter, Nahlel Bejleiri, also shows that love for Albania. 'It's not for nothing that Albania is known as the Land of the Eagles,' she says proudly. 'We have stunning mountain scenery and a wonderful coastline, both in the north and the south.' She is a graduate in Sociology and Psychology and she and her husband Ledio have a four-month-old son. 'Whereas many countries around us are torn by religious differences, we have this tradition of working together. We have to look to the future. We desperately need a leadership that is not corrupt and is willing to share power. We need to build the whole country on the foundation pillars of honesty, unselfishness, purity and love. I believe these pillars are the word of God for the future. Without them we will have nothing—our plans to rebuild will not work and the killings and chaos of the past will return.'

Perhaps in Albania, with its worn and battered infrastructure and its continuing struggle to shake off the communist past, it takes faith to have faith in the future. 'If you are a believer, it's impossible to be without hope,' says Fico. 'Freedom is a long highway, and the road may pass patches of forest, but we are on the road.' He tells how one of Albania's leading writers paraphrases Shakespeare as: 'No night can be so long that it will never see day.' ■

Richard Channer

Sokol and Vali Mirakaj: met and married within the prison system



Twenty years in Albanian labour camps

Richard Channer

The leader of Albania's Muslims, Haxhi Hafiz Sabri Koci tells Paul Williams how he kept his faith in prison.

When Haxhi Hafiz Sabri Koci entered the Albanian prison labour camp system, the youngest of his six children was just six years old. When Sabri Koci saw him again he was a grown man of 27. 'When they released me I didn't know my children,' says the Mufti (Chief Imam) of Albania, without bitterness. 'My family could never afford to visit me, as I was always held too far away from where they lived.'

A frail man of 79 with a ready twinkle in his eye, he gave my companion and me a warm welcome in his modest office in the centre of Tirana, capital of Albania. His face is lined and worn and his fingers damaged and distorted from the years of hard labour in the mines. While we talked, tea and dates were brought in. The dates, it emerged, had been brought back from a recent visit to Kuwait. As we left he insisted that we take them all with us.

He was born of a poor family in a village near Shkoder in the north of Albania. His father had spent much of his working life in Greece and died before Sabri Koci was one year old. It was a struggle for his mother and grandparents to keep him at the local school, which was attached to the mosque. A teacher there, noting his clear voice and his eagerness, enlisted him to serve in the acts of worship. The Mayor of Shkoder, who occasionally visited the mosque, spotted the exceptional intelligence of the ten-year-old and convinced his mother to let him continue his education in Shkoder at the expense of the mayor and two local merchants. Although he was eager to learn, Sabri Koci admits that it was not easy as a village boy to be suddenly transplanted to a strange city.

To make some contribution to the costs of his education, the young scholar learned the trade of an electrician, a skill which stood him in good stead in his years in the labour camps. Shkoder, which in those days had 30 mosques, was a centre of Muslim learning. His education was not of the formal college variety, but at the feet of a succession of scholarly imams. He learned Arabic and became a Hafiz: one who is able to recite the whole of the Koran by heart.

By 1966 Enver Hoxha's Communist government, increasingly influenced by the Chinese model, was beginning to intensify its campaign against all forms of religion. All were persecuted, whether Muslim or Christian. Harassment intensified for Imam Koci when he suddenly found himself being ordered to move from place to place. As his family were in Shkoder, he eventually asked if he could move back there. 'You can go to Shkoder,' the authorities told him, 'if you promise not to speak about religion.' They also said he could no longer wear an imam's robes. 'I decided to follow my own path,' he says simply.

The result of such defiance was swift in coming. A series of charges was fabricated against him. These ranged from 'economic sabotage' to 'national betrayal'. He told the tribunal that he didn't need an advocate as they had already decided he was guilty. He was sentenced to 22 years of prison with hard labour. His family home, which provided shelter for his wife, six children and his parents-in-law, was confiscated by the state along with all his books and possessions. His wife was required to do heavy agricultural labour and his children were barred from attending school.

Only those who have been in prison can know what life was like

'It was hard beyond your imagination,' he says. Initially they tried to beat him into submission. For some days, he confesses, he felt totally disorientated and bewildered. 'But you learn to cope. I developed systems so that everything my faith required me to do, I was able to fulfil. Wherever I worked, I made it my first priority to find a hidden place.' His face breaks into a smile. 'It's not hard to find an excuse to be on your own in the rock galleries of a mine.'

When asked how he coped for all those years he replies, 'From the Creator of the world I had a sense of great energy being given to me and a sense of purpose for my life. This source continued to strengthen me through all the different jobs I was given (besides being in the mines he worked as a plumber and welder) right to the last day before I was released.'

While in prison he tried to record some of his thoughts and insights, writing them in Arabic in case they were discovered. He hid them in a small box in the ground. One day a guard discovered the container. The precious writings were destroyed, but without the guards being able to read the contents.

Sometimes over the long years of different camp regimes, there were periods when prisoners were given a free day when visits were allowed. He found this hard, as his family were never able to visit him. But he made friends and a sense of solidarity grew with Christian priests who were similarly persecuted. 'Nobody can tell, except those of us who have been in prison, what life was like for so many Albanians,' he reflects. 'But we had God's help and knew that he would eventually bring down the perpetrators of all these evils.'

His release came in 1986 when he had served 20 years and four months of his sentence. He was re-united with his family, but his mother had died. Things slowly began to improve. In 1990 religious freedom was restored. The following year he was elected Mufti by the Muslim Council of Albania.

He still keeps warm and close relations with his Greek Orthodox and Catholic 'brothers'. He says the different faiths all make up one body. 'In God's sight we are not divided. We serve him in different ways. As religious leaders our duty is to love others as ourselves—and that includes honouring each other.' When the Pope visited Tirana in 1992 Sabri Koci met him and, along with thousands of other Muslims, took part in the great rally in Skanderbeg Square. 'There was no one who didn't come,' he recalls. He remembers, too, attending the re-opening of the historic Catholic church in Lac, which had been destroyed under the Hoxha regime. Thousands of Muslims flocked to witness the ceremony along with the Catholics. 'I go to the Cathedral often,' he adds.

To illustrate the closeness of the relationship, he recalls how he had once playfully asked the Catholic Archbishop, 'Do you think it took more strength out of Jesus to cure people's illnesses and raise the dead, or to cope with those who misunderstood him or wanted to argue against him?'

For the Mufti, the Muslim faith encompasses tolerance. 'We have to learn to live with each other—in many cases even the animals do that,' he says. He does not insist on purdah for women. 'Of course they should dress modestly, but if men are tempted they can protect themselves by closing their eyes.'

He feels that freedom, particularly that which derives from economic opportunity and well-being, has not fully arrived in Albania yet. What is his message to Albania and the world? 'It is to keep the heart patient in order to face life. Everything is done in the knowledge of God. So in all our difficulties we can ask God's help. If you believe that everything comes from God, you can never be defeated. You will always win in the end.' ■

PEOPLE

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

edited by
Edna Yee

Edna Yee.

Ahmed Egal: set up a vocational school for his fellow Somalis

Guerrilla fighter turns teacher

When you meet Ahmed Hussen Egal, a mild mannered accountant from Somalia, now living in Stockholm, it comes as a surprise to lean that he was once a guerrilla fighter. Today he is active in the education of the 20,000 Somalis who live in Sweden. But 15 years ago, believing that 'guns change the world', he was involved in the bitter clan wars that were tearing Somalia apart.

Egal spent eight years as a guerrilla fighter until his leader imprisoned him for a year. In 1986 Egal arrived in Stockholm as a refugee. In a Swedish language school he met a Polish refugee Wiesiek Kecik, former leader of Farmers Solidarity in Poland. They found common ground. Kecik told Egal of an experience of forgiving someone who had wronged him, linking it with a new approach to answering his country's needs.

A friend of Kecik took Egal to MRA's international conference centre in Caux, Switzerland. Upon his return to Sweden, Egal began a long personal journey of change. A year later he travelled with an aid agency to Somalia, sought out his former leader and apologized for his bitterness about being imprisoned. He then proposed that they should both forgive their main rival, the leader of a different clan. Fighting between these clans had already killed 900. A few weeks later the two leaders were reconciled, leading to a zone of peace.

The clan is the basis of the Somali social structure. There has been great hostility between them, with shifting alliances. Many of these rivalries persisted among the Somalis in Sweden. Egal started working with leaders from the different factions to build trust, urging them to cooperate for the good of all the Somalis in Sweden.

It was clear to Egal that, to be productive members of their new country, the Somali community needed education and training in job skills. And those who wanted to return to Somalia, with its suffering and lack of infrastructure, would need training to help their fellow citizens rebuild.

Being tenacious by nature, Egal went from door to door, enlisting the support of Swedish community leaders. Five years ago he set up a school to help Somalis with language skills and vocational training. His staff consists of Swedish teachers with expertise in language, nursing, accounting, computers, and 'low technology' like chip manufacturing.

Today, Egal's school is fully supported by both the Swedish and Somali communities and is funded by the EU and the city of Stockholm. His idea for vocational schools has spread to other communities. 'It is our responsibility, not others', to rebuild,' says Egal. 'How can you stay in Sweden if you're not part of the society?

'To live and work with the society of which you are now part whilst still respecting one's own culture and religion is the challenge,' says Egal.

Edna Yee

Restitution online

Although I entered law school in the fall of 1996 with the goal of becoming a tax attorney, I was drawn to a meeting of the Death Penalty Project. Defence attorneys working on capital cases needed law student volunteers to help with their defendants' appeals. Because of family responsibilities, my involvement was limited to being a pen-pal. After reading a number of introductory letters, I made my choice. The inmate's name was Michael Fullwood.

We wrote to each other for a year and then I began visiting Michael during my second year of law school. I knew from our correspondence that he was an accomplished artist and asked him what he would like to do with his artwork. Michael paused and responded, 'I want to make restitution.'

His response surprised me. He had killed his daughter's mother when his daughter Michelle was just an infant, and I was not sure how someone could make restitution for such a horrible crime.

During my next visit with Michael, I proposed starting a college fund for Michelle. Michael had seen an ad in an art magazine for a company that made notecards from original paintings and drawings. So we decided to sell cards made from his artwork and put the proceeds into Michelle's college account. It took another six months to work out all the details, but in the fall of my third year, we had 1,000 boxes of beautiful notecards to sell and a college fund set up at the bank.

I sent one of the first boxes to Michelle's grandmother, who is raising Michelle. She shared them with Michelle. Michelle was thrilled to learn that not only did her dad love her, but he also wanted to help her attend college. For the first time in 15 years, they began communicating.

In 1998, Michael and I co-founded the nonprofit Restitution Incorporated to promote healing between offenders and victims. Our first project was the National Death Row Inmate Restitution Art Show. We assembled artwork from death row inmates around the USA and have displayed their work on our website. Commemorative prints are available for purchase and the proceeds go either to surviving victims or to charitable organizations.

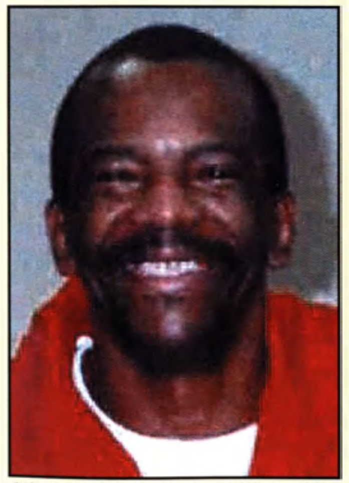
In addition to the art show, we have an 'Apologies' section on our website for inmates who want to apologize to their victims. Many inmates are extremely remorseful, and this gives them a place to share their spiritual and emotional growth.

Restitution Incorporated has also started to work directly with more victims. Members of a rape survivors' group recently visited our website to read the words written by an inmate who is serving two life sentences for kidnapping and rape. The women told us that they found his testimony healing.

I graduated in July 1999. Somewhere in the middle of my studies I realized that what I wanted most was to help those whose lives have been affected by violent crime. Making a whole bunch of money as a tax attorney pales by comparison.

Betsy Wolfenden

Website: www.restitutioninc.org



Michael Fullwood: raising college funds for his daughter

Caldogno's drop in the ocean

This year 400 children from the Ukraine will enjoy a holiday in northern Italy, thanks to the people of the small town of Caldogno, near Vicenza. Their visits have led to a remarkable cultural link between Caldogno and Kiev.

The project is the initiative of Francesca Lomastro, a historian who works for Istituto per la Ricerca di Storia Sociale e Religiosa in Vicenza and lives in Caldogno. Six years ago, when the town council had to appoint a new chair of its library committee, her cultural activity made her the obvious choice.

One of her tasks was to organize Peace Day, which is traditionally held on the first Sunday of the year. She was advised to invite a guest speaker, a volunteer who arranges holidays that take Ukrainian children away from the persisting radiation of Chernobyl.

Lomastro was fired by the idea; she enrolled 40 local families to give hospitality and made arrangements for transport and visa expenses. The town council backed her idea with a substantial contribution, which became a permanent item in the budget. The project spread to neighbouring communities and has kept growing.

Lomastro is the first to admit that it is just a drop in the ocean of the needs of the Ukraine. 'Nobody can change the world by themselves, but each of us can do something,' she said. Fortunately there are similar committees all over Italy.

Soon events took an unexpected turn that makes Lomastro's committee unique. The Caldogno families began to feel they had adopted the Ukrainian children and to visit them at home in the Ukraine. They fell in love with the Ukraine and marvelled at the striking contrast between a refined culture with widespread education and severe economic constraints.

'It is quite a lesson to realize that poverty does not mean backwardness,' says Lomastro. 'In fact sometimes the reverse happens.' Some of the Ukrainian interpreters who had accompanied the children formed a voluntary group to carry out the cumbersome paperwork. Then twin associations were established: one in Caldogno and the other in Kiev, which have taken a strong stand in refusing to give in to corrupt practices and helped speed up the paperwork.

The Italian association, Il Ponte-Mict ('The Bridge' in Italian and Ukrainian) is organizing an opportunity for a group of students from the Kiev Academy of Art and some Italian students to work together and exhibit their work at the Museo Casabianca of graphic art in the Vicenza area. Francesca is battling for the exhibition to be taken to a gallery of international fame so that it can prime a lively exchange between Ukrainian and Italian artists.

The Ukraine Embassy in Rome has chosen Il Ponte-Mict to produce a much needed brochure in Italian to describe the Ukraine to prospective visitors.

Lomastro is driven by the realization that the Ukraine has great wealth in culture, human skills and natural resources which must be salvaged before the present economic straits cause it to be depleted. She sighs, 'I must confess that knocking at doors without getting an immediate response is very hard. Sometimes I wish I had not caught this "bug"...'

Adriano Costa

Paola Muraro

Children escape the Chernobyl pollution on holiday in Caldogno, Italy.

Corrections

In last issue's *People making a difference* pages we inadvertently misspelled Alfiado Zunguza's name.

We also mistakenly wrote, in *Ear to the ground*, that the Gual Pahari retreat hostel near New Delhi was built on top of a reclaimed fly ash dump. The Tata Energy Research Institute has demonstrated reclamation of fly ash dumps elsewhere near New Delhi. The editors apologize for these errors and any embarrassment caused.

Mary McAleese, President of Ireland, has long been dedicated to justice, dignity and equality for all in a divided society, writes Peter Hannon.

Ireland's President

A VOICE OF CONTRADICTION

President Mary McAleese has always been a breaker of barriers—and she has needed to be.

She was born in Northern Ireland in the Belfast area of Ardoyne, a small Catholic enclave within Protestant dominated areas. She grew up in a deeply divided society where to be Catholic was to be treated as second class. When the recent round of 'Troubles' erupted in 1968, she saw the terrors of riots and intimidation at first hand. Family friends died in bomb blasts and gun attacks; her father's business was raked by machine gun fire; and her deaf brother crawled home bloodied from a loyalist beating.

Then there was the ceiling placed on future expectations. She tells of the day she spoke as a young girl of her desire to become a lawyer: 'The first to say, "You can't because you are a woman; no one belonging to you is in the law," was the parish priest who weekly shared a whiskey with my father. It was said with a dismissive authority intended to silence debate. My mother had inculcated into us a respect for the priesthood bordering on awe so I watched in amazement as the chair was pulled out from under the cleric and he was propelled to the front door. "You—out!" she roared at him. "And, you," she said to me, "ignore him!" It was the only advice I ever received from either parent on career choice!'

Yet, for all her strong views on the need for change, the President remains firmly rooted within her church. 'We love our churches,' she says. 'They are our hearth and home. We want them to be places of open, not locked, doors.' And this not just within Ireland. She sees the meeting of Western religions with those from the East not as a dilution but an enrichment. 'Reconciliation in Christ frees us from anxiety about our identity,' she says. 'We exist in relation to him, not through comparison with those who differ from us.'

Her story has been one of barrier-breaking: becoming a law professor at Trinity College Dublin, followed by difficult years working in RTE, the Republic's TV station, when she ran head on into an establishment wary of anyone from a Northern, nationalist, pro-Church background; then appointed as the first woman, Catholic, Pro Vice-Chancellor of Queens University in Belfast; and finally, having grown up in Northern Ireland under British rule, her election as President of Ireland, a country where she had no vote. Taking as her theme, 'the building of bridges', she made her intent clear when one of her first, controversial acts as President was to take Communion in the Protestant Cathedral in Dublin.

As you drive up to Aras an Uachtaráin, her grand official residence built for past British rulers in Phoenix Park, Dublin, you are inevitably reminded of Ireland's costly colonial heritage. Yet she now speaks for a country of burgeoning self-confidence, with a major European role. The 'Celtic Tiger' is now outperforming any economy in continental Europe.

'I ask myself, what will the next generations do with this new self-confidence?' she says. 'Used wrongly it could wither and die. But our different traditions have such rich wells of experience to draw on. Free of the sediments which can cling to past pain and hurt, these wells could offer healing around the globe where the Irish have an outreach out of all proportion to an island of just five million people. This is our historic tradition. As Christians it is our calling.'

Yet she is not naïve about the cost of removing such sediments. A vivid illustration from her own experience is given in her book, *Love in Chaos**. In 1991 Archbishop Robin Eames, head of the Protestant Church of Ireland, and Cardinal Cahal Daly, Roman Catholic Primate of All Ireland, invited her to co-chair a working party on sectarianism in Ireland and the churches' response.

She writes: 'We assembled 17 men and women of virtually all Christian denominations. We had been involved in ecumenical discussion over many years, some were close friends and had never uttered a cross word to one another. We were all genuinely concerned about the awful crucifixion of sectarian hatred. We set out enthusiastically to cook up an agreed ecclesiastical recipe which we, the good guys, could administer to the bad guys who presumably would queue outside our churches like starving people at relief camps.

'At one point an American Mennonite agreed to write a paper on the history of sectarianism in Ireland. He seemed a sensible choice. He would not write an Irish Catholic nationalist version nor a British Protestant Unionist version. For months, until we discussed his paper, our attitudes had been monuments to civility. That nasty sectarianism was *out there*. *We* were all decent Christian people.

'The day his paper was read there was spontaneous combustion. We heaped abuse on each other and on the writer so spontaneously, so unguardedly, that I was certain there would either be 17 minority reports or no reports at all. We had deluded each other, bringing to the table not our honesty and our trust that we would be loved no matter how honest we were, but our practised dissembling. We learnt that day that, in conflict based societies, festering silence is unhealthy because each side believes itself, rightly or wrongly, to be the victim of the other; that each must have its say, must speak out its pain and be listened to in respectful silence. We must learn to listen even when every word burns. The embrace of God's love does not demand that we suppress our hurts. But others have hurts, too. In the case of our Working Party we were so horrified by our public vehemence that contriteness and humility descended on our labours. We finished our work; but, for most of us, the journey into self-knowledge and self-reconciliation had just begun.'

'We are called,' she says, 'to be voices of contradiction within our own cultures; to move from "duck the blame" mode to "I am responsible for my own lot".'

Mary McAleese's husband Martin is a dentist by profession. Their family means much to her, and their three school-age children provide a lively counter-balance to the demands of public life. 'When my first daughter, Emma, was born,' she recalls, 'I approached the new role of motherhood with the jaundiced eye of older sister to five brothers and three sisters. I had had babies up to my tonsils throughout my teens. I was surprised therefore to find myself so totally smitten with my own daughter. But when I discovered two years later that I was expecting twins I hit an unexpected crisis. How was I going to divide this wonderful river of love for Emma between two more children?

'How little I knew! When the twins were born I saw how rudimentary and pathetic was my comprehension of love. Here were two babies each with their unique river of grace and love. Not only did I not have to share Emma's love, it was now enhanced.

'Exclusivity is not in the nature of God,' she goes on. 'He has no favourites. You cannot divide love. Its nature is to multiply, to draw in, to make each feel important and completely at home, to reconcile.'

She heads one chapter in her book, 'The *discipline* of love', emphasizing Mother Teresa's insistence on 'giving until it hurts'.

McAleese's spiritual convictions can be traced to her family as well as her church. She talks of her grandmother who 'lived poorly and frugally on a tiny farm in the West of Ireland. The richest aspect of her life was her faith and, in particular, her prayer life. She walked several miles each day to morning Mass, winter and summer, rising earlier and earlier to arrive at the still, dark chapel an hour early. She would light a candle, say the Stations of the Cross and then sit in the candlelight till Mass began. At first I thought her strange. Later I was grateful for the gift of her teaching, though she never once explained to me what she was doing, or why. But I knew, even then, that in the stillness was the Source which gave her courage, hope and meaning. She wanted to spend as much time as possible in his company, to learn the feel of love and how to live by his commandment to love.'

This practice of prayer, meditation and listening for God's direction is vital to the President. 'Ultimately the choices are mine,' she says. 'It is worth asking where God will be when I make those choices. Will I listen in humble silence while he speaks his words or will I regurgitate my own? Am I ready to be a blank sheet of paper for him to write on?'

'Can one person make a difference?' she asks. 'What have we done with our sense of expectancy?' And, against the background of a fragile peace process in Northern Ireland, she says, 'It is a matter of deciding what we *must* do, not what we want to do.' ■

**Love in Chaos, the Continuum Publishing Co, New York, 1999.*

Haavard Saeboe

Hilde Frafjord Johnson visiting chidren who will benefit from campaigns to forgive poor countries' debts.

Pushing for debt forgiveness

Norway's former Minister of International Development and Human Rights tells Jens Jonathan Wilhelmsen about her country's response to the international debt crisis.

Hilde Frafjord Johnson is not a tall person, but she stands tall. The cut of her jaw signals unusual determination. Her middle name—Frafjord—means 'from the fjords'. The steep mountains and barren soil of western Norway have produced resilient people.

Johnson was born and spent her first seven years in Tanzania. That shaped her values and life mission: to fight poverty. In her early teens she had already decided to go into politics. Seven years ago she was elected to Parliament, and for two and a half years, until February 2000, she was Norway's Minister of International Development and Human Rights. Having studied social anthropology and speaking Swahili, she was a natural choice.

Soon she became a respected figure in international development circles. She initiated the Utstein Group, consisting of herself and women cabinet ministers holding similar portfolios in Great Britain, Germany and the Netherlands. They were a driving force behind the recent reform of the HIPC (Heavily Indebted Poor Countries) initiative, which increased the number of countries eligible for debt relief from 22 to 41.

JJW: Did the fact that you were all women produce a more compassionate approach to the debt problem?

HFJ: Women may have more empathy, although I sometimes wonder. Maybe we have a closer sense of community with each other than men do. We were an alliance of like-minded ministers who could work with the World Bank and other financial bodies. Things began to happen, and movement creates optimism.

JJW: To what extent can a small country like Norway influence the big actors in the economic field?

HFJ: Norway became a forerunner amongst the OECD countries by being the first to have a comprehensive debt relief plan passed by Parliament in 1999. The HIPC initiative was strengthened by us offering full unilateral debt relief to countries which had negotiated a settlement within the HIPC framework. We also broke with the practice of paying for debt relief by charging the development assistance budget.

JJW: Your Government was one of the first officially to back the Jubilee 2000 campaign for debt relief. How do you evaluate this campaign?

HFJ: They have made a significant contribution by focusing the challenge and opportunity of a new millennium for all the OECD countries. That had a galvanizing effect. The campaign's lobbying was also effective. Cooperation with progressive countries and committed politicians was crucial. Jubilee 2000 could not have done it without us, and we could not have done it without them.

JJW: But do you not agree that progress towards debt alleviation has been disappointingly slow? Who keeps the brakes on or what are the main reasons?

HFJ: Financing is the biggest obstacle. The HIPC initiative in September 1999 resolved to move on a faster, broader and deeper scale, but the main creditors (in practice the G7 countries) have not put up the necessary funds.

JJW: There is another G8 meeting scheduled in Okinawa. Do you think Japan is open to playing a more positive role?

HFJ: It may be a help that the G8 summit is taking place in Japan. Japan has not contributed to the HIPC trust fund. Being host to the G8, they may not like the embarrassment of being the slowest in the class.

JJW: Your are a Christian Democrat. In the struggle against poverty you have had setbacks as well as victories. What does your faith mean to you?

HFJ: According to the Gospel you have a duty to fight for the rights of the poor. On this point Jesus was radical. On a more personal level, walking with Jesus gives you strength. You are not alone. Someone is struggling with you.

JJW: The present [Mugabe] regime in Zimbabwe asserts that the whites have stolen their land, and that they now have the right to take it back. Have certain developing countries some justification in maintaining that rich countries lured them into the debt trap and that they now have a moral obligation to get them out of it?

HFJ: The analogy limps, but there are some similarities. An example is the Norwegian shipbuilding campaign towards the end of the Seventies. In order to save our shipyards, we pushed our products on the developing countries. More than half the money owed to Norway by developing countries stems from this campaign. It was shameful.

JJW: A chief obstacle to progress in debtor nations is corruption. Have you seen examples of something effective being done to stop it?

HFJ: Corruption has been one of my main concerns as Minister. But you have to differentiate between need-based corruption and greed-based corruption. The former is mostly the result of people not earning enough to live. The second is more a question of the morality of the people at the top. Better control and auditing, press freedom and more use of the courts are needed. Good leaders must be encouraged to sack corrupt officials. Uganda's President Museveni, for instance, sacked several corrupt ministers.

CANCELA LA DEUDA
LE PARI DU CLUB:
JUBILEE 2000 DROP THE DEBT NOW!!!
annulon
LES PAUVRES
Reuters Newmedia Inc/ Corbis

Debt relief campaigners in France

JJW: How significant is the factor of debt remission in the battle against poverty? What other measures can reinforce its effect?

HFJ: Take Tanzania. It spends four times as much on servicing its debts as on education and health together. Debts directly affect the life of the poor. Some mechanisms to ensure the effectiveness of debt remission are in place. Getting HIPC support, for instance, has to be preceded by a review of the recipient's macro-economic policies. These must not only be export-oriented, but benefit the poor.

Improving governance—including fighting corruption—is also key. Every country needs to work out its own strategy, and not just copy World Bank blueprints. This is a big task for a poor country, but things are underway, for instance in Tanzania, Uganda and Mozambique.

JJW: American author Christopher Lasch accuses Western culture of narcissism and indifference to the suffering of others. Can political leadership play a part in awakening solidarity?

HFJ: I wish I had an answer. Better cooperation with the media is important. By focusing so much on catastrophes they create a skewed picture. A different input is needed. There *are* hopeful stories of what developing countries themselves achieve. Publicizing these stories will stimulate solidarity. In certain annual public collections in Norway we see incredible examples of what ordinary people are prepared to give.

JJW: Is the present Government as sympathetic to debt alleviation as you are? Will you prod them to increase the pressure on the G8?

HFJ: They have stated that they will follow up our debt relief strategy, and I believe them. As a Member of Parliament I will keep pushing. ■

BREAK THE CHAINS OF DEBT
people & planet
Corbis

Campaigners deliver letters to Downing Street.

Roots of violence: springs of healing

Charis Waddy joins Indian historian Rajmohan Gandhi on a journey through the history, pain and hope of his subcontinent.

A walk through South Asian history—with the compass points of revenge and reconciliation as guide. This is the Himalayan-scale journey that Professor Gandhi puts on offer in his new book, *Revenge and reconciliation: understanding South Asian history* (Penguin Books, India, 1999). Its two or three millennia of history are daunting: its theme is simple and up-to-date. Retaliation is a universal human reaction. Also always present is the possibility of forgiveness and a new start.

Sitting on the ramparts of Delhi's Red Fort on the 50th anniversary of India's Independence, not far from the place where his grandfather was assassinated, Rajmohan Gandhi envisaged this book. Written and published in India, under the auspices of the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi, it is addressed to his own people and their neighbours across South Asia, in Pakistan, in disputed Kashmir, in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. To write such a book, to be candid without being judgmental, is an achievement in itself. To listen in to such a conversation between closely-linked yet often warring elements in that vital area, is a privilege.

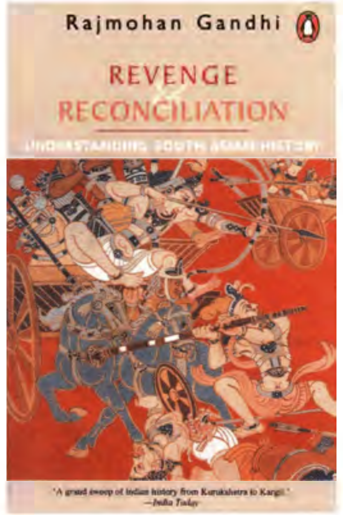
To offer not new facts, but fresh insights, is the author's aim. Reading, it is tempting to get lost in the intricacies of history, and necessary to return again and again to the insights which are universal. One of them is the value of listening—to one's neighbours in dialogue, to what is said and to what is unsaid.

What does history say about Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims? About the comparative failures of the 'reconciliation' strand offered by the Buddha, by the Emperors Asoka and Akbar? About British rule? The longest chapter is about the post-Independence leaders of South Asia. He writes with compassionate understanding about the cost to the families concerned, and especially to the women: Indira and Sonia Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, all of whom have suffered bereavement.

The book is the culmination of a career which began when editor Devadas Gandhi entrusted his son's journalistic training to *The Scotsman* in Edinburgh. Many years followed in Delhi as Resident Editor of the *Indian Express* and Chief Editor of the periodical *Himmat*. This experience led him to embark on a number of biographies of influential figures in modern South Asia: 'The South Asian violence around me has impelled me to search for its historical roots.' His books include lives of both his grandfathers—Mahatma Gandhi and Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, who became Governor-General of independent India—and also of Muslim figures bridging the gulf between India's two main communities, notably *Eight lives: a study of the Hindu-Muslim encounter* (SUNY, Albany, New York, 1986).

Books such as these, on 'history's wellsprings', may (he says) 'cause pride... also disappointment or even pain.... I console myself that frankness is indispensable at the ending of a millennium.'

This may be even more to the point as the next millennium begins. In the final chapter he looks forward to 'The new century: strategies for reconciliation'. As it opened, 'revenge was found alive and well' in South Asia, and 'reconciliation still correspondingly weak'. Does this 'reflect a tussle taking place in all of us'? Fresh questions have to be asked. He asks them of the reconcilers, the teachers, as well as of the vengeful.


Rajmohan Gandhi
REVENGE
RECONCILIATION
UNDERSTANDING SOUTH ASIAN HISTORY
"A grand sweep of Indian history from Kurukshetra to Kargil."
—India Today

Most important perhaps is his stress on strategy—strategies—for peace building. Reconciliation is not a one-off act, but a demanding choice, a protracted process. If war was globalized in the 20th Century, can mankind mature and can living together with our neighbours become global practice in the 21st?

Gandhi is just retiring from the Centre for Policy Research. In wishing him well it is to be hoped that he will find leisure to help others to look as honestly at their heritage and character as he has at his own. Sidelights on world history in his present book are a help in this. Few before have compared the *Mahabharata* with the *Iliad*, writings of the same era. Ancient Indian texts have parallels in the Old Testament books. He notes Britain's conquerors, Roman and Norman: I for one had never thought of Britain's experience for centuries as a conquered land. The American Civil War, centred on slavery, was contemporary with India's mid-19th Century rising—First War of Independence to Indians, 'Mutiny' to the British.

One key insight is the distinction between non-violence and reconciliation. He chronicles the moving story of his grandfather's part in the Independence struggle. The Mahatma's emphasis was always on the individual (and indeed this theme runs all through his grandson's book). He aimed to win the British, rather than to defeat them. Through all the pain they inflicted he managed to see them not as stereotypes but as individuals, whose hearts might be reached.

One touching example is the Mahatma's wedding present to the young Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh, married three months after Independence was won. Gandhi wrote to Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, asking him to take them a small tablecloth: 'This little thing is made out of doubled yarn of my own spinning.... Please give the bride and bridegroom this with my blessings, with the wish that they would have a long and happy life of service to men.'

It is to be hoped that the gift reached the young couple, with something of its significance.

Gandhi's writing is part of a flow of works on forgiveness and reconciliation, giving reasons for hope from different centres of conflict and spiritual backgrounds. One other such book is *No future without forgiveness* (Random House, London 1999), in which Archbishop Desmond Tutu details the story of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Like Gandhi, he is always inclusive, never judgmental: 'God does not give up on anybody'. He looks for a process which 'encourages the new culture of respect for human rights and accountability... restorative rather than retributive justice'.

Another book published in 1999 is *Forgiveness—breaking the chain of hate* by Michael Henderson (Bookpartners, Wilsonville, Oregon, 1999). Gandhi and this English writer have been spurring each other on for decades as they covered aspects of contemporary history from very different angles. Their latest books are in many ways complementary, Gandhi facing the magnitude of the task, and Henderson marshalling the good news available to reconcilers at work.

No doubt there is more to come, as courageous acts of apology and forgiveness open closed and bitter hearts in our poisoned societies. As one who has a family history connected with different parts of the British Empire—India among them—I find myself newly aware that there is unfinished business in my own attitudes. Are there fresh ways of looking at our own past that could put it to work in the service of the common future? Perhaps Indian friends will help us to find them.

Gandhi is a realist. History, politics and plans mean people. To face the future with hope, he turns again and again to the individual, and especially the ordinary Indian who against all odds toils and laughs and shares what little he or she has. 'It is those who listen—to others in dialogue and also to inner inspirations of grace—who may bring healing,' he reflects.

At the close of his book he looks out on his own city of Delhi, with its torment and cruelty, and its energy and life. 'A healing process in Delhi might speak to all of South Asia,' he writes.

'In the midst of death, life persists; in the midst of darkness, light persists. Right now, at the peak of summer, I am aware of a rain-bearing, life-giving storm outside the room where I write this, and also a flow of traffic, a flow of life.... This evening, as I take my constitutional, I will again hear happy laughter from children, see eagerness in teenage eyes, and watch the straight-backed *istri* couple working away at their makeshift ironing platform, as they have done, late hour after long hour, for years.

'May the Good Spirit that quickens the rain and kindles the laughter, the eagerness and the dedication use willing women and men to reconcile South Asia's ingenious, impossible and lovable inhabitants!'

It is a prayer for the whole world, as well, which he moves our hearts to join. ■

'INDIA I CARE' CONFERENCE:

'Corruption is anti-poor'

Vittal: crusader against corruption

Central Vigilance Commissioner N Vittal has emerged as one the main crusaders in India for honesty in public life. He has been in the headlines for publicizing on the Internet a list of senior government officials accused of corruption.

Recently Vittal appealed for a corruption-free administration as a basic human right. He was giving a keynote speech at an 'India, I Care!' conference, held at Asia Plateau, the MRA centre in Panchgani. Nearly 200 participants from many walks of national life reflected on what each could do to create a 'clean, capable and compassionate' India.

After over 50 years of independence the people of India were still living under the yoke of corruption, Vittal said. 'We are rated as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. This corruption is anti-poor. Thirty-one per cent of food grains and 36 per cent of sugar in the public distribution system, which is designed to provide food for the poor, get diverted to the black market.' Corruption had become all-pervasive, he continued. Everybody talked about it, many justified it, many accepted it cynically and many believed that it could not be eliminated. 'But, are we so helpless?' he asked.

He appealed for the Constitution Review Committee, which is looking into a Fundamental Rights Chapter, to make corruption-free service a new fundamental right of every Indian citizen.

'This will enable a new mind-set to grow,' he continued. 'It will be difficult for adults to justify their corruption to their children. For this to happen we will have to change from a "me first" culture of grabbing to a more cooperative one.'

Inaugurating the conference, B G Deshmukh, former Cabinet Secretary and Principal Secretary to the Government of India, said: 'To build a clean, capable, compassionate India will not be possible unless we undertake an extensive and deep exercise to rebuild our character and create a sense of social responsibility.' He emphasized the need for a national consensus and common endeavour. It was not a subject for political one-upmanship but a matter of grave concern. 'If we do not tackle this in a comprehensive way, I am afraid we are in for a long stretch of instability, if not a violent decade.'

Dr Saeeda Hameed, a member of the National Commission of Women, spoke about a women's initiative for peace with Pakistan. A recent delegation to Pakistan had received a heart-warming response from, among others, the President of Pakistan, General Musharraf. A similar warmth had been shown to the women's delegation from Pakistan which paid a return visit to India in May. 'It shows that ordinary people of both these countries want to live in peace and harmony,' she said.

The renowned rocket scientist Vasant Gowariker urged that Indians should not decry the nation's achievements nor be pessimistic about the future of the country. Dr Gowariker led the team at the Indian Space Research Organization that put India's first satellite into orbit with her own rocket. He said that Indians should take pride in their achievements. 'The education system which we all decry as inefficient is in fact producing some of the ablest brains in the world who are manning the leading research and industrial organizations overseas.'

He predicted that 'within the next few years India will emerge as the second largest economic power in the world'.

Evaluating the conference, Palash K Roy, an engineer from Jamshedpur, said that he used to blame the government for corruption, which foiled the business venture he had started after completing his education. Now it was difficult to find a job in a city which is 'reeling under the recession'. Since the era of economic liberalization began, companies in Jamshedpur had been doing very badly and almost half the workforce was now idle. 'Those who are lucky, like my own father, have got some benefits under voluntary retirement schemes but many have been sacked. In the old days Jamshedpur was a model. Children of all employees were assured a job in their respective companies. All that has changed. The job opportunities for people like me are very small.'

But the tough stance against corruption in public life by Vittal and others had given Roy fresh hope for the future of the country. 'People like him also give me the courage to step out of my own comfort zone and put up a fight for a clean, capable and compassionate India.'

Bhanu Kale

Africans aim to answer spiritual drought

Keith Neal

Ugandans sing at the MRA conference in Kampala.

'Transforming Africa from a bleeding to a renewed continent' was the theme of an international MRA conference in Kampala in June.

In her opening address, read by Mayanja Nkangi, Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, Mrs Museveni, the First Lady of Uganda, said: 'The problems of Africa, and of the world, are man-made, and the solutions to them are surely within ourselves. If we listen and obey the spirit of God which is within each one of us, we will find these solutions.'

Those attending came from 17 countries, including Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ghana, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and Sudan.

During a plenary session on 'Corruption, the cancer which eats the moral fibre of our society', Ashwin Patel, director of a firm of chartered accountants in Kenya, said: 'With corruption there is no neutrality. One is either part of the answer or part of the problem.' In his own firm, he decided 30 years ago to be part of neither the receiving nor giving of bribes. Rather than driving customers away, this decision had led to a massive increase in business opportunities.

In a moving session on the HIV/AIDS pandemic, Dr C Ssozi from Mildmay Referral Hospital, Uganda, said that of the 49 million people infected by HIV worldwide, 37 million were Africans. In Uganda alone 1.9 million people were HIV positive or had AIDS, including 67,000 children. Over 1.7 million children were now orphans. But Uganda's policy of openness about AIDS had already led to a dramatic fall—from 30 to 9 per cent—in the number of HIV positive women attending ante-natal clinics, the biggest drop taking place in the 15-19 year group. But she pointed out that 95 per cent of the $12 billion already spent on HIV/AIDS had been used for research and treatment in rich, industrialized countries.

The wide range of topics discussed at the six-day conference included: 'Making faith practical in the light of present religious difficulties'; 'Conflict resolution through a culture of negotiations'; 'Economic re-armament for poverty eradication'; 'Healing the environment'; and 'The role of the woman in developing a culture of peace'.

John Ntimba, a member of the Judicial Service Commission, closed the conference by referring to the worldwide spiritual drought caused by fear, dishonesty, resentment and selfishness. The cure lay in accepting the challenge 'to devise and produce the irrigation machinery to fight this spiritual drought'.

Keith Neal

Ambassadors for peace in the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa has been plagued by conflicts for the past 50 years, exacerbating famine and creating millions of refugees. So when a travelling group of four, including two senior diplomats, visited six European capitals in May, they appealed for the world community not to forget their region. Their visit to Europe, organized by MRA's Agenda for Reconciliation programme, coincided with a renewed outbreak of a bloody border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

'Development cannot take place without the end of these conflicts,' said Bethuel Kiplagat, former Permanent Secretary to Kenya's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, speaking at a public meeting in MRA's London centre. 'We need a commitment to peace and reconciliation. If there are no signs of hope we need to create them. We must not say that the task is so big that we cannot start.' He suggested that the International Court of Justice in The Hague could play a part in settling the border dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Since 1986 Kiplagat has been working, through the World Council of Churches, to help bring an end to the 30-year civil war in Sudan, 'and I am not going to give up', he said. He saw signs of movement towards peace between the eight different rebel groups in Sudan and believed that 'there is a commitment by the people themselves'.

Mammo Wudneh, President of the Ethiopian Writers Association, said that the greatest need was to cure bitterness, hatred and revenge. 'This is the time to work for peace. Our appeal and intent is for the coming generations.' When the movement for an independent Eritrea, then the northern province of Ethiopia, had first begun he had prayed to God to use his pen to help solve the issue 'by peaceful means'.

Speaking alongside Wudneh, Fessaha Fre Weri, an Eritrean business consultant and peace activist, acknowledged Wudneh's courageous articles in the Ethiopian press. They were outspoken against the oppression of the Eritreans and written 'at great risk to himself'.

The spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness, advocated by MRA, had come to Fre 'as a challenge which I did not want to face. In 1971, the Ethiopian army massacred 25 of my close relatives.' They had been herded into the village Mosque and machine-gunned. They included his sisters and their children. 'The choice before me was to overcome my bitterness or to carry a Kalashnikov [rifle]. I decided to join the fight for the hearts and minds of the people. We shouldn't be fighting over our borders, but over the borders in our hearts.'

He added that corruption had been a part of his life when he was a young customs officer. He had had to overcome this too, if he was to master his bitterness. 'My corrupt life and my bitterness were very connected and, wanting to get rid of bitterness and hatred, I also had to get rid of my corrupt behaviour.'

'Your war is our war; your peace is our peace,' said Yusuf Al-Azhari, Somalia's former Ambassador to the USA, addressing his travelling colleagues. 'The cause of war is injustice. When injustice prevails the whole system collapses,' he said. He spoke about his six years of solitary confinement and harrowing torture as a political prisoner under Somalia's previous Marxist regime. 'Ever since, I have vowed that I will help my people to overcome their hatred; to help to heal the wounds of those who have been the victims of oppression and injustice.' Al-Azhari is now working with others to establish a national government in Somalia, following the civil war.

Kiplagat urged people to 'think for the long-term healing processes', to prevent the cycle of conflicts re-erupting. 'Once relative peace has come we relax when we should be working hard to cure the bitterness in people's hearts. There is no future without forgiving the past,' he said. 'We can work on the structures and on the hearts of the people. We must avoid demonizing people. You cannot talk to a demon. My fundamental belief is that human beings can change and do change.'

Michael Smith

David Channer

Yusuf Al-Azhari (right) from Somalia: 'Your peace is our peace.'

Highlights of the meeting can be seen on a 7-minute video from: MRA Productions, 24 Greencoat Place, London SW1P 1RD, UK, price £9.50 inc VAT and p&p.

1999 INDEX

The index for volume 12 of *FAC* is now available from *For A Change*, Tirley Garth, Tarporley, Cheshire CW6 0LZ, UK, price £2.

Japanese look at family skills

A conference at the MRA Asia Center in Odawara, Japan, last May took place in the wake of shocking news reports of killings and violent extortion by frustrated Japanese teenagers. So the theme of creating right relationships between parents and children was addressed by many speakers.

Proud of his educational background, a businessman from Kobe had nagged at his son for getting bad marks in high school. Then his parents, who had lost everything in the Kobe earthquake, came to live with him, and he found himself constantly criticising them for quarrelling. When his attitude to his 84-year-old father changed, his son also changed his attitude to him.

A similar story was told by a housewife from Tokyo, who had participated in the programme of the Association for New Family Education. She said that she had passed her own childhood pressures on to her daughter. She was one of ten from the Association attending the conference.

Liu Ren-Jou from Taiwan described a weekly study course he was conducting for young mothers. It was attended by 150 mothers (and three fathers!), divided into twelve groups, many of whom had seen their family relationships improve as a result. Young people also spoke of the new vision they were finding for their lives.

Japanese participants in the Caux Round Table business forums provided a five-man panel discussion, chaired by Hisashi Kaneko, a member of the board of NEC Corporation. Its theme was 'How business can change society', with particular reference to protecting the environment. Nobuhiko Nakamura of NEC outlined the company's code of ethics. He was supported by Minoru Inaoka, director of Ito Yokado Co, who is a member of the ethics committee of the Federation of Economic Organizations (Keidanren).

Hugh Wilkinson

Geoffrey Craig

Peter Pedersen, a Danish businessman who runs a publishing company based in Japan, speaks during a panel discussion.

New books launched for the heart of Russia

More than 80 Russians braved gusts of unseasonable snow and Siberian winds to attend the Moscow launching of Russian-language editions of four MRA books in May. The St Andrew's orthodox publishing house had suggested a series on silence and listening. The books were Hélène Guisan's *La Tierce Présence* (The Third Presence), Philippe Lobstein's *Les Silences de M L'Inspecteur* (The Inspector's quiet moments), Paul Gundersen's *Incorrigibly Independent* and Paul Tournier's *A Listening Ear*.

Guisan, from Switzerland, Lobstein from France, and Finnish businessman Gundersen spoke at the launching. It took place at the Marina Tsvetaeva Museum—she was one of the great 20th Century poets of Russia. Beside a large photograph of the martyred Orthodox priest, Alexander Men, Mme Guisan asked, 'How can we ever thank Russia enough for the way she has translated her suffering into beauty and faith through her art and literature?'

Lobstein, whose late wife was Russian, moved the audience by speaking in Russian. Through her he had grown to love Russia, and now something of her spirit was living on through this venture.

Gundersen spoke as a veteran of the Finland's war against Russia. He also spoke of the need for ethical values in business.

Andrew Stallybrass, the Swiss publisher of the four titles, drew applause when he spoke of a direct ancestor in the early 19th Century who had been a Protestant missionary in Siberia. His great-great-grandfather had translated the Bible directly from Hebrew and Greek into Buryat, the language of the Mongols, and printed it on the mission's own press.

Irina Yazikova, a professor of Christian culture at St Andrew's, said, 'These are books that educate the heart. Russians are tired of ideologies and words. But there is a need for books like these that share practical experience and stress the need for us to listen to each other and to the Other.' ■

Australia

Bridge of healing

In the largest march in Australian history, a quarter of a million people walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge on 28 May to demonstrate their support for reconciliation between Aboriginal Australians and the wider community.

Aboriginal Australians form two per cent of the country's population. Their health and social conditions are far worse than any other group's, and they endure racial hostility and discrimination widely across the country.

In 1990, in an attempt to change this situation, the Australian Government established a Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. This Council has steadily brought Aboriginal communities together with the officials of their region—public servants, police, judges—in day-long discussions, which have given many a new understanding of Aboriginal people. In 1996 a new Australian Government was elected, which declared that Aboriginal interests had received too much attention, and they intended to 'swing the pendulum back'. Hundreds of millions of dollars were cut from Aboriginal programmes.

This was popular in some parts of the community. But it made many others uneasy.

This was first evident on the publication of a report about the 'stolen generations'—the Aboriginal children removed from their families, mainly from 1900-1970, to assimilate them into white society. The Government tried to ignore the report, but public concern refused to let them. Nearly a million people signed Sorry Books, which were presented to Aboriginal leaders on a National Sorry Day in 1998, organized by community groups throughout the country.

Many of the stolen generations were so moved by Sorry Day that they initiated a Journey of Healing, which aims to offer all Australians the chance to help overcome the continuing ill-effects of the removal policies. Again the Government ignored this initiative. But when they suggested that the stolen generations were exaggerating their plight, practically the whole Australian media rose up in opposition. Aboriginal issues have become front page news, and Australians are learning as never before about the ugly side of our past.

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation had been mandated to lay a basis for future relations between Aboriginal Australians and the wider community. After widespread discussions over several years, a Declaration for Reconciliation was finalized. When the Government said they could not accept all of its proposals, it was renamed a Declaration towards Reconciliation.

Sorry
RETURN TO COUNTRY

Audrey Kinnear, Co-chair, and Lowitja O'Donoghue, Patron, of the Journey of Healing, beneath a sky-written message.

The Declaration was launched at a ceremony in the Sydney Opera House which brought together the leaders of the Australian Government and of every Australian State, together with the Aboriginal leadership. Powerful speeches vied with the cultural riches of song and dance, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. The stolen generations spoke about the Journey of Healing, and the audience of 2,000 responded by joining enthusiastically in the theme song:

Come join the Journey, Journey of Healing
Let the spirit guide us, hand in hand
Let's heal our hearts, let's heal our pain
And bring the stolen children home again
We must take this journey together as friends.

To mark the launch, the Council invited all who wished to bridge the gap between our communities to symbolize this by walking across the Sydney Harbour Bridge. No-one knew how people would respond. But it will surely be seen as a turning point, not just because of the huge numbers but because of the spirit of the walk.

One story exemplifies this spirit. Before the walk a member of the stolen generations phoned me. She told of decades of abuse—physical, emotional and sexual—following her removal from her family, and said, 'I can only walk with you if you remove your Journey of Healing banner. For me there can be no healing.'

After the walk she phoned again. 'I went on to the bridge,' she said. 'I looked up at the sky and saw "Sorry" written there. I looked around at the huge mass of people who had come because they want things to be different. Tears rolled down my cheeks. And I found healing. I have been angry for years. Now I see I don't have to live with that anger.'

Her words give hope that we can find a new way. If we are to do so, the longing expressed on the bridge—and in similar huge marches in other cities—must lead to costly initiatives aimed at overcoming Aboriginal disadvantage of every kind. That is the challenge before us now.

John Bond

JOURNEY of HEALING
recognition commitment and unity
REPARATIONS
APOLOGY

The Journey of Healing march

Hexham Courant

Learning to trust again

Laura Trevelyan has no doubt at all that it was the special atmosphere she found at an international conference in Switzerland that changed the course of her life.

'When I was 15,' she recalls, 'I fell in love with the theatre and developed an all-consuming desire to act.' Born in Wales, to an English father and an Irish mother, she looks back on a happy childhood spent in various parts of Britain. Her teenage years were difficult. 'I didn't want to grow up—I wanted to be a girl, not a woman,' she says. 'On stage I could escape my life and be someone else. And of course I wanted to be famous!'

She studied French and Theatre Studies at Glasgow University and 'spent far more time acting than studying'. While in Glasgow she was introduced to a family who regularly invited her round for meals. 'They had a special quality of care and friendship,' she recalls. 'They seemed genuinely interested in me and were always encouraging.' She says she particularly appreciated this because, in the competitive world of student drama, praise was in short supply.

They talked to her about the work of Moral Re-Armament in which they were engaged. It sounded attractive in its scope and outreach. On their recommendation, in the summer of 1992, she set out for the MRA international conference centre in Caux, Switzerland. 'The centre looked like the castle in a fairy tale,' she says. 'The setting in the beautiful Swiss mountains and the sunny view over a shimmering Lake Geneva gave me a sense of awe and wonder.'

'As soon as I arrived I knew there was something different about the place,' she says. 'The participants came from all over the world, and there was a quality in the way they treated each other that was different from anything I had experienced before. They were polite, friendly, respectful, interested, interesting and encouraging—the opposite, in fact, to the sometimes cynical and confusing environment at university.'

The first person she met was a young Burmese. 'I was 22 and I didn't even know where Burma was! My ignorance of the world was exposed. Suddenly my dreams of being a famous actress seemed very superficial.' It struck her that she was seeing a working community which was a model for the way the world ought to be.

The session which made the biggest impact was one called 'Regions in crisis, regions in recovery' that appeared to have gathered people from crisis situations all over the world. 'I listened agog as people from war-torn areas told heart-rending stories of suffering and pain. I remember one Russian woman talking of all she had been through in her country and in her marriage. In spite of everything she had decided to forgive her communist oppressors and her unfaithful husband. I could hardly believe what I was hearing. I had never before encountered such openness, honesty and bravery.' The more she heard the more convinced she became that something vitally important was on offer.

She says she had come to the conference feeling cynical about all relationships, after being taken advantage of. 'The experience had left me feeling that it would be the height of stupidity to trust anyone or to believe that anyone loved anyone. Talking with people at Caux convinced me otherwise. I was rescued from going down a path where I would have hurt others (and myself) in an attempt to get even with the world. Caux offered me an alternative life. It had never dawned on me that God could speak to you and have an active role in your daily life—decisions, choices, motives. I felt that I had "arrived"—like coming home.'

She finds it hard to describe exactly what happened to her. 'It was almost as if I had been given permission to be myself. There was no longer any need to pretend. I felt I was being given an infinitely precious gift. Some people talk about being "born again" or "seeing the light". I know such language makes some people cringe, but I feel no embarrassment whatsoever. It was both those things and more. My previously token faith came alive. Everything made sense.'

After graduating, she earned the money to travel to Australia to join other young people in an MRA training course in 'Effective living'. It was in Australia that she helped launch a youth magazine called *Global Express*, which she now co-edits from Oxford, her current home. She is still excited about *Global Express*. It keeps young people all over the world in touch with each other and has proved an effective forum for fresh ideas.

'By the way, you may be wondering what happened to the acting thing,' the journalist queries with a smile. 'Well, I can honestly say that I don't care if I never act again. That passion, which used to hurt because I wanted to act so badly, has been replaced by a passion to do God's will.

'And that,' she adds, 'is a wonderful thing.'

Paul Williams

Global Express: tel +44 (0)1865 460158
http://www.mra.org.uk/globalex/

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A DIFFERENT ACCENT

by Michael Henderson

Apology comes from within

I was recently asked why I seem to blame white people in my book, *Forgiveness: Breaking the Chain of Hate*. I must admit that it was a new thought to me that I did. But as I pondered it was clear to me why a reader could form this impression.

My philosophy of life is simple. It is that if you want to bring an answer in the world the best place to start is with yourself and your kind, whether it is your race or your country or your creed; that very little is achieved, except to put their backs up, by pointing the finger of blame at people of backgrounds different from your own.

When I write about Ireland I write from the perspective of what we Anglo-Irish and English have to make amends for.

When I write as a Christian I recognize the many sins of omission and commission of Christians through the ages, sins the Pope has so challengingly reminded us of.

And when I write as a white man I am very conscious of what people of colour have had to suffer as a result of our attitudes over centuries.

None of this is to say that others are blameless or that I excuse or minimize wrongs that they have done. Or that I lack vision for the rebuilding role that people like me are meant to have. But if I am writing about forgiveness and repentance I know where I should start.

I hope that, if a person of colour or an Irish Catholic or a Muslim or an American or a Russian were to write a book with the same themes, they would start from the point of view of where their people have erred. I believe that all of us are equally loved by God and have the same potential for grace. Therefore the most productive and radical approach is to address what *we* can deal with and take responsibility for.

'She was overwhelmed by the absence of blame'

I came to this view more than 50 years ago when I first attended MRA conferences at Caux, Switzerland. This was soon after World War II when the wounds were still raw and at most international conferences the blame for that terrible period was being thrown around liberally. Germans and Japanese said that Caux was the first post-war conference centre where they were welcomed as equals.

I do not remember the Germans and Japanese standing in the dock at sessions in Caux. Nor for that matter the British nor the Americans. Just as in succeeding years I don't recall white South Africans being taxed with their sins. There may have been an occasional outburst of bitterness on the part of someone who was for the first time confronted with people who had done them immense harm. But the emphasis was always on each person starting with him or herself. Again and again that personal example inspired others to dare to accept the same starting point.

The result was that probably more Germans and Japanese faced up to their own and their countries' sins, more British conceded how badly they had treated Germany after World War I, more Americans exhibited an infectious humility, than at any other place on the globe. As a white South African said in effect, echoing the experience of others, 'Everywhere I have been people have pointed the finger at my country and I have resisted. Here no one did and I changed.' An American political figure attending such a conference was puzzled at first by the atmosphere and then realized, she said, that she was overwhelmed by the absence of blame.

MRA does not say that white Americans must apologize to African Americans for slavery nor white Australians to Aborigines for the way they have been treated nor that African Americans or Aborigines should forgive white people. Many people have apologized and many have forgiven, and they and others have been blessed by their acts and attitudes. It was not a matter of political correctness imposed from without but of a moral imperative accepted from within. MRA, like Jiminy Cricket, says, 'Let your conscience be your guide.'

And there is no colour to conscience.

Michael Henderson is a British journalist living in Portland, Oregon, USA.

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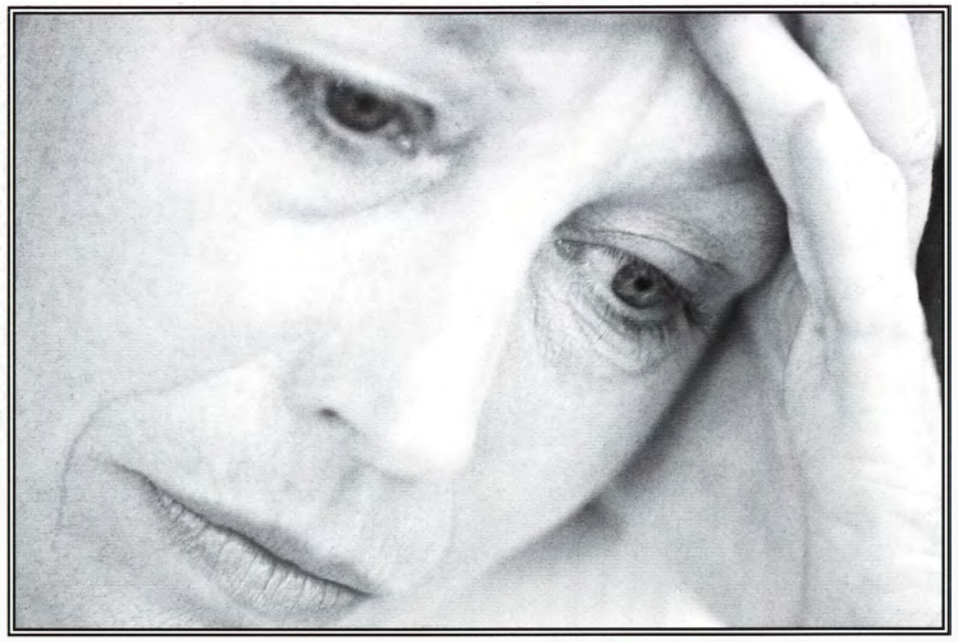

Photo: Tony Stone (Picture posed by model)

NOT GUILTY

For the past two years I have been on something of a spiritual journey. This has meant seeing psychologists, doing relationship courses and attending seminars and retreats. At one course the facilitator looked at me and said, 'You're stuck in guilt.'

And she was right. For years I've been dogged by crippling guilt and fears—yet all the while feeling under the compulsion as a Christian to 'pass it on'. But pass what on?

Recently I attended a seminar given by the author Selwyn Hughes. When he talked about the MCs—'Miserable Christians'—I immediately related. He went on to ask, 'What are your core beliefs?'—ie what do I say to myself, 'for me to live is...'

I've had to admit, harmless though it may sound, that one major drive for me has been to live for my white conscience. This has led to patterns of crazy, defensive living, taking little or no risks, rarely voicing opinions and generally skirting areas that might mean taking responsibility for my mistakes—very negative, uncreative living. Ask my husband and children!

This way of living creates an insane world where you mentally backtrack over events and can never forgive yourself, and where you try to control and manipulate events to be 'right'—completely missing the bigger picture in this obsessive pre-occupation to perform perfectly. And who in the end is on the throne of the heart? God or self?

Selwyn Hughes also said that emotions like guilt or shame represent a warning light to say we have set ourselves a goal that is unreachable. We are looking for significance, self-worth and security in that goal instead of in God. And that as we repent, and make it our goal to please him, he not only changes our thinking, but sets us free from this wrong idol.

And it's true. It's a slow journey, but I am gradually discovering that I can have times of quiet that focus on God (rather than being self-condemnation sessions). I am learning how to worship him (which for me now includes singing) and discovering how loaded the Bible is with promises of God's renewing our minds. Bit by bit he is healing my negative patterns of thought.

As part of a theological exam recently, I had to study a verse from the prophet Jeremiah: ' "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts..." declares the Lord.' Or, as one beautiful commentary puts it, God's external laws will become inner principles that enable his people to delight in doing his will. In other words it is *he* who is committed to loving and changing me, until I become more like Jesus.

There's a passage in St Paul's second letter to the Corinthians that especially speaks to me. 'Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.' I am discovering that when God rebukes, it's a gentle rebuke (in contrast to my self-whipping), it is cleansing and freeing and I feel renewed and forgiven and in need of him—in fact closer to him through mistakes. It is his gift of a sound mind. ■