

Remaking the World: What we can learn from Frank Buchman

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Introduction



Frank Buchman made an important contribution to reconciliation and peacebuilding after the Second World War. He was honoured by France, Germany, Japan and the Philippines for his efforts at creating international understanding. Here is Buchman with French statesman, Robert Schuman, one of the founders of the EU --- Buchman played a significant role in encouraging Schuman to believe in the possibility of peace between France and Germany.

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Buchman lived through a turbulent era in world history, full of war, fear and uncertainty – not unlike our own. As we look ahead to what 2024 might throw up, it is easy to feel a sense of anxiety. What might we learn from how Buchman approached things that could help us respond constructively to our challenges? This talk is divided into two sections, each containing four parts. In the first of them, I summarise some of Buchman's attitudes and

approaches. The second section focuses on his methods and practices.

Attitudes: (1) Purpose and perspective

Many are asking: What can I do? How can I make a difference? According to Buchman, we all have a part to play in building a better world, whether it is at the local or global level – in what we do, and in the qualities we bring to what we do. Each of us has something to give to the world, and in giving our best, we find meaning and purpose – and we are surely all looking for a sense of meaning.

Related to this and growing out of his faith (he was a Lutheran minister), Buchman sought to express the idea that God or the Creator has a plan for bringing people together – a plan for humanity if you like – to which we can all contribute if we allow Him to be present in our lives. Faced with so much sadness and tragedy in the world, this may not be easy to see, but it is something to hold on to.

A sense of calling sometimes arises in response to a particular issue or situation. Buchman wanted to expand our range of vision and to demonstrate how we are part of one interconnected world family, where all nations have something to offer. He thought it possible to construct a more collaborative world order.



Lennart Segerstråle, Finland, 1959 Fresco: L'eau vive / Am Strom des Lebens / At the stream of life / Ved livets kilde

Mountain House, Caux

This painting (above) by Finnish artist, Lennart Segestråle – who was influenced by MRA – offers a visual image of how the different countries of the world could all bring their distinctive contributions.

Hope can grow from the idea that there is a purpose to our lives. But it is not an abstract thing that we can summon up intellectually. It develops out of our taking responsibility – a kind of ‘creative responsibility’. Hope and a sense of connection with others and the world around us grow through our taking responsibility for the world, as well as taking appropriate steps for change in our own lives. At a time of crisis, steps of change and responsibility can break the power of cynicism and despair. Hope comes not just from our thoughts, but from the way we live. New beginnings are possible.

Attitudes: (2) A moral and spiritual approach

Buchman believed that there is a moral and spiritual dimension to life – a ‘forgotten factor’ which is often missing in the world’s deliberations. Of course, religion can be misused – he would have acknowledged that – but he always insisted that the human being is a spiritual as well as a material and rational being.



This sculpture (above) is the gravestone of Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader who succeeded Stalin in 1953. The sculptor was the artist Ernst Neizvestny.

Stalin was responsible for some terrible crimes, and Khrushchev courageously exposed this. But he did so in such a way as to promote his power – this was an ambiguous exercise in truth-telling. The sculpture brings this out, showing how Khrushchev was a conflicted person with light and dark elements, good and bad elements competing within him for primacy.

More generally, the sculpture is a way of showing that there are moral and spiritual forces within the human being. It is a picture of all of us – for we all have good and evil within us. Sometimes the darker forces masquerade as forces of light. We have addictions, ambitions, and unhealthy coping mechanisms. Buchman believed that the spiritual element needs to be awakened in people if are to tackle the needs of the world at a deep enough level. ‘The world is slow to realise that the spiritual is more powerful than the material’, he said.

This applies at the national level as well. Countries can circle the same problems again and again without ever moving on. Deep changes are often needed if unhealthy patterns of behaviour are to be broken, and the creative potential hidden within people

released. Individually and collectively, we need to develop the habit of listening to the forces of goodness.

Buchman also believed in the unity of the human being. It is a mistake to think we can compartmentalise our lives: permitted dishonesty or corruption in some areas will inevitably influence other parts of our character. Moral integrity should pervade the whole.

There was an urgency in Buchman's thinking on these matters. He thought that the world starts to fragment and collapse when we ignore the reality of the spiritual life. An alertness to this reality is a necessity for the safety and security of nations.

Attitudes: (3) Personalisation



Some of us have positions of power, while others do not. But in whatever situation we are in, we can exercise leadership by taking responsibility. One of Buchman's aims was to foster and encourage effective leadership. He talked of the need to 'support' the 'framers' of justice and peace. There was an element of 'accompaniment' in this, as reflected in this picture of Buchman walking alongside the Oxford theologian. B. H. Streeter, in the 1930s.

There was a 'strategy' in this. Buchman believed that in crises, there was value in trying to identify people who could have a positive influence. His link with Robert Schuman reflected this. It was a strategic approach based on developing people.

This involved a kind of 'personalisation': Buchman talked of taking the needs of nations and answering them with people. 'Prepared' personalities are everywhere, he suggested.



This is Buchman meeting Egyptian Prime Minister General Neguib in 1952.

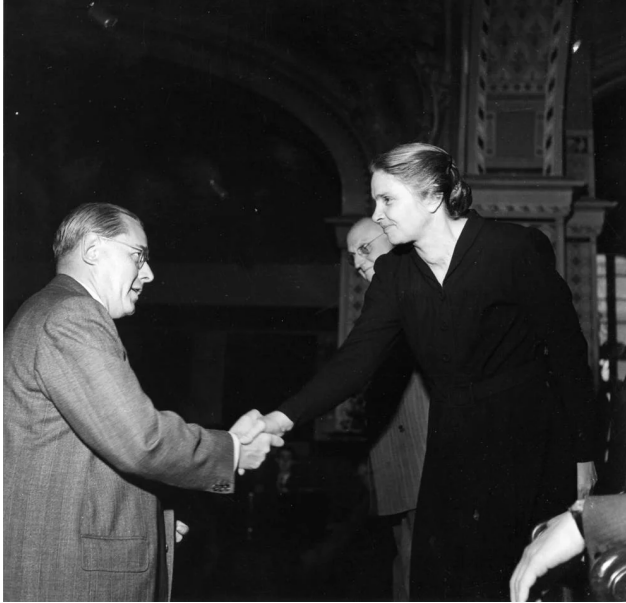
Buchman tended to see people not just as delegates or deputies, but as people in the round – he was interested in their whole families. A good listener, he got to know people and the issues they were wrestling with, politically and personally. He could give his attention fully to the person he was with, and people responded to that.

Attitudes: (4) Problem-solving through unity

Buchman thought that the spirituality of some people was too much focused on themselves and the individual soul: it was important for a life of faith to have relevance to society. He encouraged people to believe that social and political problems were solvable, especially when unity was present among decision-makers. Unity itself he saw as a fruit of something else – a change of heart. 'Change of heart' was a phrase that cropped up in a number of his speeches.

Democracy was also a topic he cared about. His message on this was that democracy is not only about functioning institutions but also the qualities of the people who run them. A good structure cannot work effectively without a good spirit. Democracy needs to be grounded in moral integrity. Some people who talk about democracy are dictators in their private lives.

Buchman thought negative experiences could be transformed, while negative experiences that were not addressed could get passed on to others. Democracy could get derailed by unhealed grievances and hatred, for example, while a person who had found freedom from hatred could be a unifying influence. This was exemplified by French politician Irene Laure (photo below), who after 1945 had been full of hatred of Germans, but through her contact with Buchman and MRA became a source of reconciliation between the two countries.



Buchman's conception of unity involved people from different walks of society working together. He also encouraged people from different religious denominations and faiths to work together. In his mind, global problems would be better addressed by increased levels of international cooperation – in this, his work reflected a wider ecumenical current.

Connected with this, Buchman believed that there was a spiritual dimension to 'freedom'. He would have concurred with the African bishop, St

Augustine of Hippo when he said that people best find freedom in serving God. He thought that democracy was sometimes distorted by materialistic thinking and the worship of money.

Practices: (1) Silence and quiet



Do we have the inner freedom to be creative? Much of the time we are reactive fearful personalities pulled in different directions. Buchman talked of the possibility of living a panic-free, fear-free life, challenging people to break the power of their instinctive actions and reactions by obeying the Spirit. To facilitate this, he encouraged people to aside time for quiet listening to the 'still small voice', or 'guidance' – he used different phrases to describe the nature of this deeper kind of listening. Buchman tended to call the practice itself the 'quiet time', although other phrases can be used.

From the Eastern Orthodox tradition, this icon depicts a man trying to listen to the voice of an angel speaking over his shoulder.

The silence Buchman was seeking involved people learning to let go of the busy quality of their everyday thoughts to allow a more spiritual dimension of reality to become evident. It meant a 'letting go' of selfish agendas, a kind of 'surrender' – to use a term much used in the religious culture he grew up in. Buchman's quiet times also involved reading the Bible, I guess slowly sifting it – more for inspiration than information.

The quiet time for Buchman was a place where people might find some of their deepest needs and motivations coming to light. Healing, wholeness and integration could come out of it, if practiced over time and turned into a habit. It could set people's lives going down a better path and give hope in hopeless situations.

Buchman talked of the 'great symphony' that comes to us when we listen. And he said that a vision for the world would emerge as people got 'guidance' from God about their lives. The practice of silence would also lead to people experiencing a heightened quality of thinking and living – 'silence can be the regulator of men and nations', he once said.

Practices: (2) Working with others

Buchman also encouraged people to seek inspiration from others. A collective time of silence is a slightly different experience from an individual one. Here is a picture of him having a collective quiet time with a group of university students in the 1930s – the notebooks in the picture are indicative of a culture where people were encouraged to

write down their thoughts and reflections.



Small groups of people can often accomplish great things. Historians of science have observed that important discoveries are often the fruit of work by small networks of academics. Jesus trained his disciples by sending them out in small groups. The hero of J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy novel, *The Lord of the Rings* – so popular with Western audiences – sets out on his

mission with a small group of friends.

Buchman had a similar belief in the capacity of small groups to influence events, especially if responsive to God's leading. He envisaged small groups of people taking responsibility for their countries and situations. One of his supporters used the phrase 'cabinet of conscience' to express the idea of a group of people thinking about the moral and spiritual needs of a society.



These paintings of birds, once again by Segestråle, are depictions of community. In the first of them, the birds could be seen flying together on some kind of mission.



The second of the paintings has a family feel to it. Buchman thought that unity in the family was key to unity in the workplace – the domestic and professional sides of life overlap.

For any of us, being part of a creative group or network of people can help us gain a sense of purpose and direction.

The psychological value of belonging to a healthy community has long been recognised by churches, mosques and synagogues.



Although a Christian, Buchman felt it possible to work with people from other faiths. He once said that the ‘combined moral and spiritual forces of the nation’ were needed to create a healthy society. In this picture we see him with First Nation Canadians in 1934 – this is indicative of a belief that indigenous cultures had an important role to play.

Practices: (3) Creative initiatives

Opening hearts is an art requiring huge sensitivity. Buchman once said that the ‘art of reconciliation’ had not kept pace with the art of war. One way he promoted the art of

peacebuilding was through imaginative hospitality. Hearts may be more receptive to new thoughts and approaches when people feel relaxed.



In this picture from 1938, these girls are helping Buchman to cut his birthday cake. Buchman was the son of a hotelier from Pennsylvania, and he always appreciated well-cooked food and the cathartic power of humour.

The imaginative lunch or dinner party could also play a role at the political level. Here we see Dutch Foreign Minister J. A. E. Patijn speaking at a dinner at the League of Nations in Geneva in 1938, organised by the OG. Patijn was seeking to build bridges between the Netherlands and Belgium after a period of tension, and the dinner party provided a natural venue for him to speak of his personal experience of this. It was a way of bringing living moral experience into a governmental or political context. The dinner was the fruit of the inspiration of an elderly Scottish lady who wanted to bring a spiritual dimension to the League of Nations. Buchman thought diplomacy had a spiritual side to it.



In MRA, books, films and musical theatre were all deployed in the strategy of trying to touch and change hearts. At the height of the Cold War, one MRA play was put on for just one person – the Prime Minister of Burma. On the eve of Congolese independence in 1960, an MRA film on reconciliation between colonial rulers and African nationalists, Freedom, was shown to the incoming Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba and 17 of his cabinet

– along with all of their chauffeurs.

The speaking tour was another method used by MRA. In the late 1940s, the aforementioned Irene Laure travelled across Germany talking about her experience of overcoming hatred.

Practices: (4) Sustained engagement with situations and issues

Buchman's efforts at building unity were not always successful. But when they were influential, there was often a backstory. For example, his post-war work in Germany had roots in his work in the country over previous decades – he first visited the country in 1903.



His first visited Japan in 1919. Here is a picture of his being awarded the Japanese Order of the Rising Sun (1956).

There is value in being embedded in situations over time, in getting to know a city or country well and getting to know the key players. Knowledge of history is also important – and here the discipline of reading is important for developing understanding. Without in-depth knowledge, one's responses to a situation can be superficial. Many of Buchman's supporters made efforts to acquaint themselves with the ebbs and flows of history in particular regions or countries – the conflicts, moments of unity, the history of faith and spirituality. Such work helps to develop a comprehensive vision.

Linked to this, the translation of concepts from one culture to another requires sensitivity. Concepts that exist in one society do not always exist in another or have slightly different meanings. Buchman took ideas and metaphors current in popular culture and sought to give them a deeper meaning. One could imagine, in our day, his taking an idea like 'artificial intelligence' and suggesting that there is a very real moral and spiritual intelligence available to all when people listen to God and build unity with others.

Buchman also talked about the value of being 'flexible to the direction of God's Holy Spirit'. He meant not having preconceived ideas about people or situations, but seeking to align himself with what he thought God was doing. The task was to develop a receptive attitude of mind – an attitude that was not so much about achieving as receiving.



Conclusion;

When people are unselfish, informed and alert to the Spirit in a disciplined yet flexible way, unexpected opportunities can arise. Some of MRA's best work in Africa opened up in this way. This painting of a door opening is by Norwegian artist, Victor Sparre – who was influenced by MRA. Doorways can open for all of us if we are ready for them.