CHAPTER SEVEN

WORKING WITH SPECIFIC CONFLICTS

I will now go back a little, to the latter part of 1994. The Autumn was spent on report writing in relation to the first Geneva workshop and on various pieces of facilitation work in the UK. My next experience of cross-cultural training was in Beirut, in December that year. Unlike the Geneva workshops and the trainers' gathering in Israel/Palestine, this training was planned for participants from a single country: one with a history of conflict, in a region of conflict.

It is not necessary to be in a multi-cultural group to experience friction. There are certain patterns in group dynamics which seem to apply rather generally. In this case the cultural differences were between trainers and participants, not between the participants themselves. Nonetheless, there were matters of conflict between participants, of a politico-religious nature.

The research tasks I set myself for this workshop in Lebanon were related not to the nature of the group or to the conflict of which they were part, but to two of the questions raised in my first Geneva account: the idea of lightness and gravity (with George showing me that a more relaxed approach is possible), and to facilitator and participant roles and relationships. I think my supervisor had suggested I might look at what could be an exaggerated sense of responsibility. These are my words, not hers, and probably I have overstated what she said. Whatever her words, I recognised something about myself that I was eager to address. I planned in this round of enquiry to focus on my attitude to success and failure. I am prone to see all that falls short of perfection as a disaster, and I wanted to find a better sense of balance. This would entail discovering a way of being discriminating in my evaluation of feedback, knowing what to take seriously and what to set aside. Secondly, I wanted to monitor the way I fulfilled my role as facilitator, aiming to respect my responsibility and function, and at the same time respecting the participants; in particular riding lightly the kind of teacher-pupil power struggle which had gone on in Geneva, and had eventually resolved itself so satisfactorily.

After the workshop, I wrote a brief evaluation for the organisation that had employed me to do this work, and then a research post-script. The report was quite open (that is, not guarded), but focused on external aspects of the workshop, rather than on my more inward and personal inquiry questions. In it I discussed different aspects of the workshop, looking at them from some distance, relatively dispassionately, indicating what I thought were important considerations for the organisation. The research post-script adds a more personal layer of reflection which goes beyond the particular event, making wider connections and weaving what had taken place and what I had noticed in Beirut into the process of my inquiry at different levels.

Both the report and the research post-script were written soon after the event, largely from memory, with the help of the few journal notes I had made. I shall reproduce them both in full. They reflect, I think, the more relaxed approach I had aimed to take.

'EVALUATION OF BEIRUT TRAINING, DECEMBER 4 - 10 1994

Size and nature of the participant group

The regular attendance of around twenty-five NGO representatives provided a group of perhaps ideal size, maximising the learning opportunity without interfering with its quality.

The mix of religious groups represented was quite heavily weighted towards Islam, though within that category there was diversity, with Sunnis, Shiites and Druze. Maybe had there been a stronger Christian contingent, the discussion which finally took place about sectarianism would have been engaged in sooner and more strongly.

The different approaches of the purely humanitarian and the more political organisations probably blunted or diffused the focus of the group's work. On the other hand, it was maybe important that such a range of NGOs was represented, in view of our desire to promote understanding of the nature of 'civil society' and strengthen its cohesion.

Location and facilities

Being in a beautiful spot away from distractions was a great benefit. The accommodation was fine, the simultaneous translation worked remarkably well and the food was excellent! The cold of the first days was certainly difficult, but soon forgotten once the central heating was on and the sun came.

Training content

Our attempt to incorporate a variety of outside elements - films, panels, guest speakers - although in the end we were able to limit them, was a confusing factor in agenda planning and on occasion led to overload. Our first day was, to my mind, less clear in form and purpose than it could have been, though much of the declared confusion came, I think, from the insecurity of the group and the different expectations of participants. Given the overall shortage of time for the ground we wished to cover, maybe the pace of the first day could have been smarter - though as I write, I feel the necessity for allowing initial space for manoeuvring and settling.

The programme was too packed for comfort overall, and the 'need' to include the range of elements agreed between the organisers and local partners imposed a streamlined and therefore somewhat monotonous set of processes at times: not an ideally varied range of activities and exercises. The attention we gave to the problem solving stage of conflict resolution was inadequate.

However, it seemed clear as we neared the end of the week that participants felt they had discovered much that was new, and that we had opened up what was, for many, a completely fresh approach which they considered highly relevant to their work and situation. Their engagement with all that was offered was lively and constant, including their engagement with us as trainers.

Changing dynamic within the group

The group transformed itself, in the course of six days, from a collection of somewhat suspicious and querulous individuals into a real community, full of warmth and affirmation. Having spent most of the week avoiding the real issues among and between them, in the last couple of days they began to discover the possibility of real communication. It seemed clear to me that the move from a competitive, 'own agenda' style of interaction to a more mutually attentive, open and co-operative one was a big shift for many of them, and that that was the final (partial, of course) breakthrough within the group and within individual members of it.

Team work of organisers and trainers

The strained relationship between the staff members of the two organisations, while it made for a somewhat tense atmosphere at times, did not prevent the smooth running of the workshop, which was very well provided for and managed - leaving the three trainers free to do their work of planning and facilitation. The three of us worked remarkably comfortably together, considering our different personal styles and backgrounds. I think that we were able to help set a relaxed and open tone for the sessions and that our willingness to be different, albeit hard for some participants to understand, offered a model of openness and complementarity which was healthy, if culturally challenging.

Conclusion

Overall I consider we fulfilled the workshop's purposes of promoting constructive approaches to conflict within and between Lebanese NGOs and encountered by them in their work. Plans being made by many participants as the workshop ended to meet again to reflect and build on their learning and to make plans for building interorganisational co-operation were evidence that the further aim of promoting such connections had been met. How long lasting or far reaching the workshop's effects will be we cannot tell - though we can make some future enquiries. We sowed and watered some seeds together. The people who live there will now do what they can with them.

Personal comment

I am grateful to the organisation for this opportunity to learn more about the challenges and benefits of cross-cultural training. Questions of language and interpretation, so closely related to cultural concepts and norms, were, not for the first time, prominent in our discussions and provide much food for continuing reflection. As usual, I also learned a great deal from my fellow trainers. Thanks all round.

RESEARCH POST SCRIPT

I believe the tone and content of this evaluation, written for my employers, accurately reflect the more relaxed approach I managed to take to this workshop - as a survival measure in the face of expected and real tensions and work load, and in response to my growing awareness of my tendency to be over-demanding and critical of myself. I have admitted gaps and miscalculations without agonies of self-blame and I have recognised our achievements. As I reflect on it all a month later, I feel I did well in maintaining my equilibrium during the week. I recall feelings of diffidence and inadequacy at the beginning of our team planning; a sense, too, of being treated as something less than an equal by my two academic male colleagues: a sense which may have been nothing more than a projection of my own feelings onto them. However, as we moved from planning into action (and also, I admit, [what I saw as] the limitations of one of my colleagues became increasingly apparent), I experienced my own ability with the group and in the planning and put away my reticence.

What I observe at this distance about respect, as it was absorbed as a value and experienced within the group, is that what was of most importance was the move from a kind of formal, wary observing of its theoretical requirements, and those of etiquette, to a real recognition of the other as being made of the same flesh and blood: *essentially* the same, the differences being secondary. Such recognition, in a society where identity is defined first and foremost in terms of the thing which divides (religion), in terms of differences which have been the pretext for war, is quite a breakthrough.

About respect and the sharing of responsibility between participants and trainers: at one point some participants were complaining that we had not yet addressed the most serious and central conflicts of the region. I was facilitating at the time and my response was clear: that we had continually invited them to work on the issues that most concerned them and that they had chosen to avoid them. It was up to them and

they still had two days left. I felt good then and do so now to have been so clear. I was both restating the sharing of responsibility and playing my own responsible part as challenger and framework provider. The response of the group was to accept the challenge and take on their responsibility and use the opportunity of the remaining two days to engage with each other on difficult issues which they now had the trust and the courage to address.

Thinking now about my own role and strengths generally as a trainer, and going by feedback from participants and colleagues, I think I do a good job with conceptual explanations and frameworks, being clear and cogent and holding participants' attention well. One colleague also told me that I have a way of saying value- related and philosophical things with emotional and motivational content in a way which is not mawkish but strong. I like that. I consider that values base to be at the heart of my work. What I mean to do is to be open about myself and my own outlook, while not imposing it on others.

In spite of differences in culture, the more places I work, the more I feel the language of the heart is a common language. Winning respect and building trust is also a task of the facilitator. We took this group, at times haltingly, from distance and mistrust to community.

We did, however, run into linguistic difficulties in Beirut. The Arabic translation for 'power' has to be either 'authority' or 'strength'. My definition, on this occasion, was the ability to affect something, to make a difference - and there is no Arabic word for power in that sense. This linguistic difficulty was also an opportunity for a more thorough and intense exploration of meaning than might otherwise have taken place.

I am interested to find that my recollections of the thoughts, feelings and interactions of our time in Beirut are still vivid with me, despite my lack of journal notes. I have always had a good memory for things which really engaged me - though for nothing else. I conclude that the degree of recall I am now experiencing is enhanced by the new level of awareness in and after action which I am increasingly achieving. This also means that I need not, in order to continue my research, impose on myself tremendously taxing journalling duties in the midst of already taxing work. Hurray!'

Re-reading these two pieces, I sense a growing confidence in my own abilities and judgement. I had also added to learning from previous workshops about the part played by language, and about group dynamics. And I had clearly discovered, once again, that overloaded agendas and time management were a problem. There were new things, too. This was the first time that I had had participants who wanted to be *given* case studies from their own situation, rather than readily embracing the opportunity to develop their own. (Although this was the first time, it was not the last. See Harare account in Chapter Eight.) I think in Beirut the reluctance came from wariness about taking on the responsibility - and the risk - of opening up their own conflictual politics within the group. I have experienced this reluctance in more recent work in Croatia and Romania, and realise I have begun to take a more proactive line in response to such reticence. I shall discuss this later, in Chapter Nine.

The closing remarks of my evaluation reflect both my concern for the usefulness of these workshops, and what I consider to be realism about the degree of responsibility we could take for that. When I read now that 'we took' the group 'from distance and mistrust to community', I recognise a pattern which pleases me; but I also feel some unease. It sounds patronising and self-congratulatory, as if I were taking credit for what the participants did - or as if we the facilitators had manipulated them into doing it. I also mistrust the pattern a little, or at least want not to take it for granted. I realise that if (as I remarked at the end of my first Geneva account) we had stayed together longer in Beirut, new conflicts would have arisen - and healthily so. Yet I do find that in groups prepared to wrestle with what divides them, there is usually an eventual move to affirmation of what unites.

In a similar vein, I remember that my chosen phrase, 'the language of the heart', seemed to my supervisor to verge on the mawkish. I feel that now, but have as yet found no other way of saying what I mean: that there seems to be a level of quite deep understanding possible between people, even where the language of words and culture are no means of communication.

I said when I explained my methodology that I had aimed to evaluate feedback openly, but not to be too eager to abandon my own position. Maintaining that balance has not been and is not too easy. I am both opinionated and diffident (or insecure). In relation to this particular question

about emotion and language, I am not yet sure of my own ability to distinguish the line (if there is one) between sentiment and feelings which should be honoured (which stand up to the challenges of reason and experience, and provide useful energy and will). This uncertainty in me makes the evaluation of feedback difficult. On the other hand, I have recognised a need to use language with greater precision; and maybe that is the route to checking the content of what I am trying to say.

In Beirut the sense of community which was created within the group emerged through a process which began with considerable tension. This tension had, I believe, two main sources: suspicion and resistance on the part of the participants towards the European-American team, and suspicions between the participants themselves, not to mention the conflict on the side between the two organisers. The tension between participants and facilitators was, like the hostility between the Western and Eastern organisers which probably augmented it, connected to ideas about neo-colonialism. I was very much aware of this, and maybe exaggerated it, because I was in the Lebanon for the first time, and therefore especially aware of my own ignorance. In this the Beirut workshop differed substantially from the workshop I shall describe next.

WORK WITH GROUPS FROM FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

My next workshop was for people from a region with which I was relatively familiar. Several of the participants were known to me or to colleagues, and I think there was no tension or resistance between them and me. However, like the participants in the Beirut workshop, although they came from what had been till recently one country, they were not from one action group (as with the work I had done in Belgrade) or one ethnicity, so that intergroup tensions could be expected to make themselves felt within the workshop. In the first of these two 'former Yugoslavia' workshops, participants did however share a quite profound commitment to interethnic respect and co-existence, and were already engaged in work for peace, most being trainers themselves. Like the Israel gathering, this was not a training workshop, but a meeting for trainers and educators from different parts of former Yugoslavia, who came together to exchange ideas,

skills, techniques and problems. It was held at an educational centre established with the support of the Austrian Government, for the training of 'peacekeepers and peacemakers.'

I was there as one of the few resource people from countries outside former Yugoslavia, representing the committee which had organised the meeting. Since this was not an event at which I expected to play a training or facilitator role, I did not regard it, at the time, as a research cycle, though I maintained my journalling habit, and the piece I wrote about it afterwards was produced in the first instance for myself and for my colleagues on the committee which sponsored the event. I will include these reflections because I think they are not very different in tone or content from what I would have written for my research alone; by this time inquiry had become a habit for me. The committee likewise has an action learning remit, and the issues raised in what I wrote were important for our collective thinking and working, as well as for me in my research. I conclude with some ideas about guidelines for the kind of training we as a committee would want to offer: ideas which reflect some of the elements which I consider important if training interventions are to meet the requirements of respect in terms of usefulness. Here, then, is my report.

'SOME REFLECTIONS ARISING FROM THE SCHLAIINING EXCHANGE MEETING

The idea of this meeting for trainers and educators, to exchange ideas, skills, techniques and problems, came with much enthusiasm from participants in the Budapest evaluation meeting eighteen months earlier. The original convenor fell ill and it was a year later that the idea was reformulated by Committee members and correspondents at a European conference on peace and conflict resolution meeting.

During the two planning meetings held on that occasion, it was emphasised by those from outside former Yugoslavia, with the apparent concurrence of those from within, that this proposed gathering was primarily for the 'insiders', and that they should play the main role in selecting participants from within the region; also deciding which outside trainers should be invited, and consulting with relevant groups in their region about the content of the meeting's agenda. The outside trainers were to be limited to

five, as against thirty from inside, and they were to be there as friends, colleagues, co-learners and, if appropriate, resource people.

With hindsight it is apparent that we were not sufficiently clear as to who would actually draw up the agenda or facilitate the sessions. Suffice it to say that, when we gathered in Schlaining, I, for the Committee, was anxious not to assume control and that most if not all the participants from within former Yugoslavia assumed that it was the task of the outside trainers to run things. In the void created by these conflicting expectations, the convenors from Belgrade and Osijek came together with me, at my request, to consider how we might get the show on the road. During the first evening we collected needs and offers for the agenda's content, then stayed up, exhausted, till after midnight, trying to collate and categorise them and find a pattern to build the agenda.

After an explanation from me about how the Committee and outside trainers saw - and did not see - their role, and a somewhat shaky first morning session, things got underway, with pairs of trainers (one insider and one outsider) volunteering to run different sessions; but at lunch time the two insider convenors and I expressed our exhaustion and desire to be relieved of our unwelcome load and were immediately succoured, temporarily relieved and permanently augmented by other planners and facilitators. From then on we swam along together in an efficiently structured-and-ad-hoc manner. This hard-won co-responsibility was one of the things most appreciated in the final evaluation, as an analogue for the work of mutual empowerment we were all engaged in.

This struggle and its outcome have given me much food for reflection - on assumptions, perceptions, communication and the lack of it, and the difference between dependency and imperialism on the one hand and the desire for a rest and some useful input on the other! What had felt by the outside trainers to be sensitive and respectful had been seen by the others as something approaching dereliction of duty.

One further episode did, however, make me feel we had, as a committee, been on the right track in wanting to place responsibility for the content and running of the gathering as far as possible with those from former Yugoslavia. I was asked by one highly educated and skilled professional woman, a leading member of a most impressive group of peace educators, what was now the status of that group. I was

baffled by the question. What could she mean? Why was she asking me? It emerged that she wanted some kind of validation from the Committee for their work and competence - perhaps accreditation even. I simply said that they had been skilled professionally before I had ever met them, that they had done more training than I had had hot dinners, and that they would continue in their highly valued work quite independently of the approval of the Committee, which was glad to play a support role but had no status to bestow. It seems those working in the former communist world have a lot of recovering to do in the area of self-respect. I was delighted when later this same woman and her colleague asked me to be a co-trainer with them in a piece of work *they* had been invited to do. It made me feel that we had, after all, the makings of a healthy relationship.

The overall content of our Schlaining meeting was a surprise to me - though maybe it should not have been. It was very much focused on individual psychological impulses and needs. Social and political considerations were scarcely mentioned; strategy likewise. For instance, in our session on recovery and reconciliation, conversations remained in the interpersonal realm and most participants could not be coaxed into consideration of inter-group conflicts and needs. The immediate reason for this seemed to be that the inner pain that was released in this exercise needed a lot of time for processing. We had not allowed enough time for this to happen and for the wider questions to be considered. But I think that what was true in this exercise is true more generally: that both because of the political and social upheaval which has followed the collapse of communism and because of the misery of the war, the spiritual or emotional turmoil and hunger of people is immense. This inner pain requires attention and a degree of healing; people need some kind of psychological care and sustenance, if they are to go on functioning and finding ways to act creatively. They also need to make some kind of sense of what has happened and is happening in order to see what can be done. Their own individual experience is the most natural - and arguably the most important - place to start; and starting there fulfils an immediate personal need.

Furthermore, whereas those working in the many peace groups of former Yugoslavia can have an impact at the community level, in most if not all cases, their direct political leverage is virtually non-existent. They were concerned to be more effective in their dealings with those in authority whose permission they needed to carry on their activities. Here again, however, most participants were reluctant to concede that an official is not simply a human being to be reached out to, but also part of a system, both constrained and motivated by position and power. Maybe recognising these wider

pressures and frameworks is not really useful - only disempowering; but maybe it could enable people to operate more strategically.

One other consideration occurred to me. This was, apart from two participants from former Yugoslavia and one outside trainer, an all female group. Given the strong macho culture in which these women are living and working, it seems possible that they react in a way by having a particular regard for the subjective and the psychological (and a high proportion of them are psychologists -clearly a women's profession in their region). Those of us from outside did comment on the absence of substantial male participation in Schlaining, which reflected the composition of their groups at home. We asked how they would explain it, but received no answer. I wonder whether the predominating style and interests of their membership both reflects and perpetuates this gender imbalance. (I realise that I could be seen as falling into some fairly crude stereotyping here, but feel that cultural factors have an inescapable influence which can, however, be modified if we are aware of them.)

None of the outside trainers offered any real challenge to this very personal way of thinking. This was partly, maybe, for some of us, a reflection of our own personal skills and inclinations, but I think that we were also going with the flow -respecting the expressed needs of our friends. It seems to me now that Schlaining was fulfilling the function of a psychological or spiritual health farm. Participants had put 'burnout' high on their list of things to be addressed, and I think that this time together was a way of addressing not just the question but the fact of burnout.

Nonetheless, I am left with some important questions. I feel that some of the training packages most favoured and represented at this exchange meeting are, if they stand alone, over-simple and inadequate in offering or encouraging a realistic and rounded response to conflict, at the interpersonal level, let alone the social or political. For us as a committee, I think I am raising some important underlying questions about responsibility and judgement. It is another form of the question about who knows best, which regularly comes into debates about the role of a trainer: teacher, facilitator or both? And it brings with it questions about who is an appropriate trainer. As yet our judgements in this area have been tacit rather than explicit. These are sensitive matters, and most of us are into conflict avoidance, despite our rhetoric. (Well, I speak for myself, of course.)

As far as I can identify my own current working assumptions about the Committee and the kind of training it aims to provide, they are as follows:

The committee's work is aimed at providing supportive resources to individuals in groups, and to the groups themselves, who wish to be or are engaged in creative social and/or political action in situations of conflict. Therefore what we offer should relate both to personal resources and capacities, and to organisational, social and political matters.

When a request comes to us from a new group, or a group new to conflict resolution thinking, the training 'menu' we offer should be broad, providing an introduction to the values, approaches and skills we aim to support and promote. (We need, at some stage, to clarify together what those values, approaches and skills are, and make sure that our assumed agreement about them is real.)

A group may ask for specialised training, or some particular 'brand' of training, either because of their own particular needs or interests, or because that is what they have heard about from others. In that case, so long as that special form of training is in line with our agreed values and approaches, it seems to me we should try to provide it; but we should also make sure that the group concerned has -or has had - made available to it other forms of training which could complement the specialised, or put it in context.

In former Yugoslavia we are often working with a particular pre-existing group, in which case it should not be too difficult to establish with them what their particular training needs are, constructing agendas in co-operation with the group. Though they will need to have some understanding of the options, these will be offered in response to their own context and expressed interests. Where a workshop is being held with a temporary group, brought together specifically for the occasion, their overall needs will have to be estimated by the organisers and trainers, and the first part of the workshop, if not all of it, pre-planned.

The trainers we invite to work for us should be characterised by skill in their field, but also by humility, sensitivity and flexibility, with a desire to respond to need rather than promote their own preferences or formula, and aware of their own limitations.'

Later reflections

I am interested by the firmly prescriptive tone of those last paragraphs, and by the fact that it does not make me feel at all uncomfortable. I think that is because the committee has taken on particular purposes and responsibilities, and I have a role of responsibility within the committee. I also knew that we were looking for greater clarity on the issues under discussion, and that my advocacy for certain positions would contribute to that. These questions which I raised with the committee have recurred throughout my research: questions about what makes for respectful intervention in situations of violent conflict; questions also about the relationship between clients and service-providers: about avoiding the abuse of power or encouragement of dependency, but also recognising and accepting the effects of history on relationships, and the power and responsibility associated with this kind of work.

The special 'psychological' character of the Schlaining workshop came from many things: the emotional tension the participants had been carrying; the fact that they were all (or nearly all) trainers, some of them strongly influenced by a particular form of psychologically focused training; the scope and the limits of their perceived possibilities at that time, and the possibly related fact that they were nearly all women, in a society where politics (as elsewhere) is very largely male territory; territory which has in any case been largely taken over by violence.

Another workshop: similarities and differences

In August the same year, I was facilitator of another event for people from different parts of what had been Yugoslavia, this time a training workshop, held expressly for women. It was organised by a Swedish ecumenical body as part of a European church programme for the promotion of nonviolence. I was the only facilitator (which I later came to see as unwise, especially in such a potentially conflictual group). The organising group of Scandinavian women (five in all) participated in plenary sessions of the workshop, and played a supportive and servicing role. A few of the participants already had some involvement in the human rights and peace movement, but most were new to the idea of involvement in this kind of work, and new to this kind of

workshop. Like the participants in Schlaining, they came from very difficult circumstances and were carrying much fear and grief.

We were housed in a guest house beside lake Balaton in Hungary. In these delightful surroundings the women had a chance to let go of some of the grief and tension they had carried for so long; a time away from the necessity to cope. It was an immensely charged and cathartic week, though it also involved much hard thinking and planning. One major challenge was to deal with the conflict present in the group. I had been aware of the potentially explosive mix of participants, but somehow had not really registered just how much we were all taking on.

My account of the workshop, written soon after the event with the help of detailed journal notes, reflects the emotions of the week. It draws me back into them when I read it, and at the same time embarrasses me a little at a distance - which is true of many of my accounts. I am once again made conscious, on re-reading it, of the value I put on the discovery of unity. This continues to make me uneasy; and yet, if I remember what these women had suffered as the price of *dis*unity, this valuing does not seem inappropriate. Maybe tolerance is a less ambitious concept than unity, and one which would serve just as well. (Voluntary tolerance presupposes, I think - particularly after hard conflict and acute suffering - some strong underlying value or impulse to support it; but there is also a kind of tolerance which is born and developed through necessity, for instance when people start trading with each other again.)

Writing my account of Balaton was a way of processing my own feelings after the workshop. It was a chance to tell a story I needed to tell, as well as a way of inquiring further into its meaning. It is relatively short, describing two key episodes in detail, and discussing other aspects of the workshop in more general terms, relating them to other workshops and to my inquiry more generally. The account is reproduced in full. As elsewhere, the names of people have been changed, and organisational names replaced by generalised descriptions.

'REFLECTIONS ON A WORKSHOP HELD BY LAKE BALATON IN HUNGARY

AUGUST 20th - 26th 1995

Apart from the four Swedish, one Finnish and one Hungarian woman representing the European organising group, and the workshop leader from England (me), the group that gradually came together at a Reformed Church conference centre near the shores of Lake Balaton was made up of women from different parts of what was once Yugoslavia. There were five Hungarians from Vojvodina and one from Croatia, one Serb and one Albanian from Kosovo, one Croat and one Serb from Belgrade, and Croats and Bosnians from Zagreb and Osijek in Croatia, and from the border town of Zupanja, which has suffered years of constant bombardment.

Ages ranged from late teens and early twenties to middle age and beyond, which, together with the variety of styles, personalities and professions, and the mix of deeply religious women, Protestant and Catholic (no Orthodox or Moslem) with atheists and agnostics, made for a group of great complexity. Two things united us: that we were all women and that we all longed for an end to the hurting in what was once Yugoslavia.

Although I had been well aware of the intention to bring together a regionally and nationally mixed group, and to draw in women who had not yet experienced similar workshops, I had not fully internalised what that would mean in terms of fear, suspicion, pain and hostility. As part of the introductory process on the first evening, participants spoke - first in twos and threes, and then in the whole group - of their hopes and fears for the week. What they hoped for was trust , openness and tolerance; what they feared was mistrust, lack of openness, and conflict. At the word 'conflict', one young woman exclaimed that she was shocked that anyone should think conflict possible in such a group. This gave me the opportunity to say that I fully expected conflict; that it was my experience that groups started with a determination to be united and that in the event it was through conflict in various forms that they forged a stronger, deeper unity; that we had succeeded in bringing together a group which mirrored the mix of nationalities of former Yugoslavia and that by the same token we were bound to experience some of the tensions of the current situation there; that we had come together to learn about creative responses to conflict and that learning by doing would be the most fundamental learning; also that I was confident we could do it - manage the conflict, respond creatively - and that I wanted participants to trust themselves and the process.

The women engaged with a will in the first full day's work; but I sensed their tiredness and stress. By the afternoon, rumour had reached me that the Hungarians from Vojvodina had told the Hungarian (from Hungary) organiser that they suspected the two young Serbs of being spies. Before I could arrange to meet with them to discuss their fears, the storm broke. In the evaluation at the end of the afternoon, M., one of the Vojvodina women, having in various small but important ways, as much for personal as for national reasons, found herself out of tune with the larger group, exploded with agitation and said it was not possible for her to work in a group where some members supported the expansionist ambitions of the Serbian government, and where she felt that to be open would expose her to great danger.

Olga, one of the two young Serbs, also not the easiest personality in the group, giving a first impression of sulkiness or arrogance, responded that she had not expected to be attacked in such a group and that she felt threatened by such behaviour. This, as Maria later explained to me, was the last straw for her. How could a Serb feel threatened? It was the Hungarians who were being threatened (and worse) with the suppression of their language and culture, with the confiscation of their homes so that they could be given to Serb refugees from Krajina, ultimately threatened with 'ethnic cleansing'. She left the room in tears. The group sat dumbfounded and I acknowledged the distress and fear that the exchange had both reflected and engendered, repeating that such conflict was to be expected, that the feelings on either side were understandable and should be respected, that I had every confidence that they could be handled and that it was good for all of us that they had come out sooner rather than later. As I left the session, I spoke with Olga, who was clearly upset at Maria's reaction and said she had not intended to hurt or offend her, but explained her own feelings at being, as she felt, accused.

I went to Maria's room and found her in great distress, sobbing that she was not used to such 'psychological workshops', that she had been already near to breaking point and did not know if she could stand the pain of this experience. I held her, comforted her, apologised for any part I had played in causing her such pain, listened to her explanation - the suffering and fears that had led to her outburst; her indignation that Olga should claim to feel threatened. I tried to explain to her, from my own understanding of what I had heard and from Olga's clarification, what Olga had meant. Maria asserted that she had not accused anyone of anything - had spoken only generally - which I challenged, as gently as I could, repeating what I had heard.

I also said that I knew Olga already, and that she was well known in the peace movement (which Maria correctly said did nothing to prove she was not a spy) and that I was quite sure she was an opponent of Serb expansionism and nationalism. Maria could not see why she had not said as much, and I pointed out that she, with her background, would consider that self-evident. At last I asked Maria what she wanted to happen and how I could help. She replied, 'Oh I know what I must do. I'm a Christian. I have to be reconciled.' I wanted to ask her if she understood what she was saying, but decided that would be impertinent. She gave me permission to outline her feelings to Olga, and to arrange a meeting. Then she dried her eyes and came down to dinner. I marvelled at her courage.

After the meal I found Olga and tried to help her understand (without betraying any confidence) what lay behind M.'s outburst and subsequent walking out, explaining that she had no experience of opposition or peace movement Serbs and needed to hear Olga say what she (Olga) took for granted: that she opposed her government's policy and actions - and had indeed suffered for her views and actions against those policies. (She had been suspended from her job for six months.) Olga was only too willing to accept both the explanation and the need. She and I were looking for Maria when we came upon the residue of the base group to which, by good fortune, they both belonged. They were discussing together, the one Croat and two other Hungarians from Vojvodina, what they could do to help their two missing members. I said that I thought their greatest need was to feel accepted, that their behaviour was understood and that they would still be welcome, and would have the group's support in dealing with their conflict. Olga hung back, saying she did not want to interrupt their discussions, but they drew her in; and at that moment Maria arrived and joined the group and she and Olga began immediately to say to each other what they needed to, with the group's gentle support; and seeing the matter well in hand I withdrew.

By the end of the week these two women, the young Serb punk from Kosovo and the middle aged Calvinist Hungarian from Vojvodina, had become each other's firmest admirers. 'I still find Maria's views difficult sometimes', said Olga, but she's wonderful.' Olga's apparent sulkiness and distance evaporated as the week went by, and her engagement was thoughtful and committed (despite late nights and hangovers). Maria, through an astonishing piece of sustained virtuoso role-play, in which she took the part of a young single black mother of three unruly boys, became a star in the group (stardom consolidated by her impersonation of a noisy and prolifically egg-producing hen at our final party) and a major contributor.

I would like to have been more alert to the position of the two Serbs in our group. (We had not realised how the group from Serbia would be composed.) They felt very much isolated and besieged at times, as they told me later. They had no traumatised Serb refugee in the group to point to, either - no comparable suffering to place beside the suffering of some of their fellow participants. But they really handled their position very well, and their very vulnerability in the group probably helped to disarm the prejudices of others. They also shared information, in a quiet way, about the pressures and difficulties of their own lives (which are very far from easy) which came as real news to some group members, and radically altered their perceptions of what it could mean to be a Serb.

The individual (and related) journeys through the week of Olga and Maria somehow symbolised the unfolding of the whole group process. When I announced at the beginning of the second full day that Olga and Maria had met, together with their group, and had reached a new understanding, the relief was palpable. I remarked that although it was unlikely that we had seen the last of conflict, we could now feel the confidence that came from experiencing that we had the capacity to handle it. These feelings were reflected in the feedback from the base groups that evening. Trust was growing. Participants were far more confident and at ease, relaxing into the process.

Because of what had happened, I had decided, after some reflection and consultation, to change the order of the agenda, so that instead of proceeding with questions of violence, nonviolence and empowerment, we reverted to the subject of communication and the obstacles to it, including matters of identity, prejudice and strong emotions (followed by 'needs and fears mapping' - an exercise in empathy as well as analysis). One experienced participant whom I consulted felt this was something we needed to do, in order, especially, to address the question of individual and group identity and responsibility. Nonetheless, she was not convinced that we could handle it. We decided that it was a risk that had to be taken (the idea of risk-taking was a theme for the week) and in the event the day was all we could have hoped. My consultant told me that evening that she had been very much afraid, but now felt completely satisfied - to the point that if there were nothing to follow 'it would be enough.' We had done what she had not thought possible and looked at these hard issues in ways that had not threatened participants but (in the words of another base group reporter) drawn them through a process in a way that did not hurt anyone but in which each felt she had

been listened to. Since the questions we had worked through were also inescapably challenging, this was good to hear.

The crucial exercise, I think, had been one in which participants are invited to look at the question of identity and belonging. Each is asked to make a list of as many groups as she can think of to which she belongs or which help to form her identity; then to select the three which she considers most important and to write by each of the three something about it that makes her feel proud, and something about it that makes her feel uncomfortable or ashamed. Participants are then asked to share these lists with one or two others (and possibly go on to tell each other about occasions when they have been on the one hand victims of prejudice or discrimination and on the other hand guilty of them. We did not do this.). Individuals share with the whole group anything that they choose to, discussing, as appropriate, questions of difference, justice, and the need both for critical awareness, and respect and sensitivity, in relation to our own cultures and those of others.

Later in the week participants chose to analyse together situations 'so hot', according to my experienced consultant, 'that we'd have needed the fire brigade if we'd mentioned them at the beginning'. There were differences, arguments; but handled from a basis of trust, and therefore no longer too threatening. Nonetheless, the women were surprised by - and justifiably proud of- their own courage.

This profound learning and changing, brought about by the experience of confronting conflict and building community out of difference, was further deepened by the experience and recognition of common pain. On the morning of our next to last day, as we shared stories of nonviolent action, we were stopped in our tracks by an explosion. In all probability it came from the use of dynamite on a building site or in a quarry; but in our group its effect was devastating: panic, half relief, nagging doubts, bitter tears. Once the women were convinced that there was no danger to us there, they were overtaken by the fears and grief of years - and of their present reality. The stories came spilling out: of cratered gardens, rivers where no-one dared swim, useless wrecks of houses, lost relatives, the daily risks of humdrum activities. After much crying, holding, smoking, singing, more crying, more cigarettes and coffee, this courageous group went back to work. That is how they cope - by carrying on. And at our party that evening we laughed as none of us could remember laughing - real laughter, joy, total silliness, complete relaxation; and closed with more tears, as we lit candles of hope and longing.

Could all this have happened in a mixed group, or a men's group? I think not; but is that my prejudice or lack of trust? Is it possible to generalise? There were clear reasons for the intensity of feelings here; but in a mixed or male group could they have been expressed and handled with such freedom? Could they have been allowed to flow, to reach completion - both the pain and the comfort, the tears and the laughter? Probably physical contact is important in all this, and in our group it was unrestrained. (I certainly felt, and wrote in my journal on the first evening, how totally different men and women are. I realised how free and at home I felt in the group, and noted, 'I should try and respect 'the other' more (ie men). I do the classic thing of applauding individuals, then regarding them as exceptions and rubbishing the rest.')

In my reflections on the gathering of trainers and educators (almost all women) from former Yugoslavia held in Schlaining in the Spring, I remarked on what seemed to me a reluctance to spend time on analytical and strategic thinking and the more political aspects of conflict. Although the word 'political' was used only pejoratively at Balaton, there was no reluctance to engage with questions of inter-group conflict and public policy; indeed, the applicability of the offered models to such situations was a matter for great satisfaction, according to the feedback of all the base groups. The cases chosen by the different working groups during the day were highly appropriate to the models (or vice versa!), and the analysis and consequent strategies which they produced extremely cogent. The theoretical input given to provide a context for the work of that day was also received attentively. Indeed, I remarked in these women no lack of enthusiasm for theory - only a determination to find practical applications for it. Likewise, our discussion on the theoretical and philosophical basis for nonviolent action, and its different forms, was valued for its relevance to participants' own experience - because it gave a name and a thought frame to what they had been doing instinctively, so affirming their already courageous and imaginative efforts and helping them to think about them more clearly. In addition, participants considered their new-found knowledge to be practical because they saw it as transferable to their groups at home (especially with the help of the promised manual).

The assumptions on which this workshop had been based had been explained on the first evening and were as follows:

> **that the spiritual, emotional and practical aspects of the group's deliberations and experiences will be woven together, since they are inextricably linked;**

that the group will become a community of learning, using participatory methods, drawing on the experience and wisdom of each person, and working in an informal and relaxed atmosphere;

that analysis and imagination are both important, and that laughter and gravity are complementary;

that the agenda which has been prepared is intended as a framework for the development of understanding, skills, resources and commitment, and that it can be changed as the workshop goes along;

that the group's own experience of working together will provide important material for learning, and, when it seems particularly relevant or necessary (for instance, if there is a conflict), what is happening in the group may, for a while, become the focus of its work.

We lived out all these assumptions. Our days began, for those who wanted it, with a time of meditation, to which many contributed -those who had already identified themselves as religious. But the depth of communication and emotion which characterised the discussions which went on in and out of sessions, and the passionately held values expressed, could also be termed 'spiritual', and one of the cross-boundary exchanges which took place in the group was between religious and not-religious members discovering what made the other tick.

The mixture of seriousness and levity, intense discussion and crazy games, helpless tears and uncontrollable laughter, was also a hallmark of the week, and gave us a feeling of wholeness in spite and because of the grief. It was a mixture we needed for the health of each individual and for our healthy growth into a community.

The experience of discovering and sharing so much latent knowledge, both in plenary sessions and in work done in small groups, was a powerful and exciting one. One participant said to me at the end, 'How did you do it? When you asked us a question, you wrote down all our answers. How could you know we'd get it right?' I explained that I worked from the assumption that they did know most of what they needed already, and that I had made any additions or comments I had felt necessary. Another participant, giving feedback from her base group, remarked, 'It's interesting that the things we've been learning have been things we already knew but couldn't use because something in our thinking was stopping us.' Helping the knowledge (as in 'understanding') to flow, as well as giving it some useful order, is a large part of education. Exchange of information was in this case also of great importance. Within

the divided region of former Yugoslavia, it is hard for communities to know what is actually happening elsewhere, and what others are experiencing.

This group's sharp engagement at the conceptual and analytical level was well matched by its imaginative and creative energy; which meant that reports from small groups, which can so often be tedious and lacking in impact, were in this case fascinating, being both clear and colourful in their presentation; and in the breaks as well as in sessions, women sowed and drew, read poems, created symbols and danced.

The variety inherent in the methodology of the workshop, and its participatory nature, together with the experience of handling the dynamics of our own group - served, according to participants, to maintain both interest and energy. ('We saved a lot of money here. Often at seminars we get bored and go to the shops instead.') Besides maximising learning by the sharing of knowledge, participation aided its digestion. 'It's easiest to remember things you've been involved with. Working on our own cases and doing role-plays: that's what made it all work.' (Base group feedback again.)

The agenda certainly underwent changes, both major and minor, in response to what was happening in the group and to needs expressed - for example for more rest at lunch time. Responsiveness to need was something we all aimed for, and represented the living out of the value of respect which provided the foundation for our working and living together. One of the base group reporters, expressing her group's appreciation for the fruit which was provided during breaks, noted that it was not only the fruit itself that was appreciated, but the care which its provision represented. Through this kind of practical respect, through the experience of mutual attentiveness, through the base group process which provided a place for all voices to be heard, channelled, and taken into account, participants felt the healing and strengthening power which come from recognition and acknowledgement.

I hope that respect, acknowledgement and encouragement were among the things I was able to offer as workshop leader. With this subject matter particularly, it seems essential to try, at least, to demonstrate as well as talk about it. This is true for the whole group, as well as for the leader. For me, it was a particular pleasure to have someone say to me at the end, 'You're a wonderful pedagogue (am I really a pedagogue?) - not just because of your methodology: most importantly because of your attitude.' And I can say the same for the group: they were wonderful participants, not just because they engaged with everything with so much zest and intelligence, but

above all because they lived out the care and acknowledgement which lay at the heart of all our work and aspirations.

At the beginning of the week I had the feeling that the working agenda we were proposing was in itself a profound disrespect for the women's real (apparent) need for nothing more than a good holiday - and I think more than a few of them shared the same feeling. However, as the days went by, it began to be reported that this was much better than a holiday, as well as being a holiday in itself because it was so different: it was giving the women something that they sorely needed: time out of danger, time to be looked after and free of responsibility, but also food for the mind and heart: understanding, inspiration, encouragement and love.

I cannot adequately express my respect for these women: for their courage, vitality, determination, their sheer will to keep going, keep living, keep their lives, their dignity and humanity intact. The way they went back to work after that bomb scare was symbolic of the way they cope at 'home'; how they keep picking themselves up and doggedly carrying on with their lives. One of them described how the women of her home town, Sarajevo, manage, without chemist's shops, without even running water, to keep themselves immaculately turned out - not so much because it matters in itself, but because it symbolises their determination to retain their dignity in the midst of degradation. Others spoke with weary pride of the fact that every day they get up and prepare food, take their children to school, do whatever work there is to be done. This is the way they survive; and in addition they still find the will to keep struggling for the maintenance, or development, or resuscitation, of those things in society which even now embody human decency. This was the common ground they found, the spirit they shared and nourished in this week by the lake.

In the closing session our interpreter, a highly professional but somewhat unapproachable woman, finally thawed and spoke for herself: 'I spend a lot of time at important conferences where the words are all empty - hot air - and nothing real is said. The contrast could not be greater with this workshop, where everything that has been said has come from the heart. I have been immeasurably enriched.' She spoke for me too; and that communication of such depth and honesty took place in such a group and at such a time seems to me clear proof of the miraculous power of our will to connect, of our instinctive recognition of our interdependence, our need for communion. Given our capacity for hurt and destruction, thank God for such a power and such an instinct.'

Later reflections

It will be clear from those last paragraphs that to respect such a group was hardly effortful. They commanded, or rather drew, my respect, both on account of what they were living through and the way in which they were dealing with it and with each other. The acknowledgement and encouragement which they gave and found in this workshop were of the greatest importance: a kind of spiritual food. Bringing their own knowledge and skills into recognition was part of this; so the spiritual and the practical were not separate.

I have reflected since this workshop that to have allowed myself to be persuaded to facilitate such a week alone was not only unfair to myself, but bordering on the irresponsible. I know I felt the weight of it at the time, although I did not fully articulate it. I felt too important: both too powerful and too responsible; too much and too little respected. I notice that in my account I wrote about the role of workshop 'leader', which was the way the organisers spoke and thought about it. I see now that I was drawn into that way of thinking, and at one level enjoyed it. I am still not sure how I think about it, except that it makes me uncomfortable. But I am clear that, whatever the nature of the role, I had better not undertake it alone in future.

Although the time-task-refreshment question was, on balance, more positively experienced at Balaton than in some other workshops (the work being considered 'much better than a holiday'), it was clearly still an issue. There are, it seems to me, no easy answers; but it seems that what one vital factor is that the work should be felt to be meeting a real need. Beyond that perhaps the most one can hope for is not to get the balance so wrong as to destroy good energy and goodwill.

Research summary: learning from the three workshops

In one way these workshops were similar to each other, being in each case for participants from different groups within one area of conflict. In other respects they were very different. The Beirut

workshop feels very far away, in time and place and emotionally. The other two feel much closer. That will be partly on account of my ongoing connectedness to former Yugoslavia; but I realise also that working with women only groups feels like a special kind of being at home, with one area of tension (for me at least) excluded at least from the process itself. I think the level of my emotional engagement with the Schlaining and Balaton workshops is reflected in my style of writing about them.

Another likely cause of a relative sense of distance from the Beirut workshop was the fact that I was in an unfamiliar place and culture; but I think more important was the 'fact' that for the earlier part of the workshop at least I felt suspicion on the part of participants towards the facilitators, which I construed as a reflection of relations past and present between the Arab world and the West. I have never experienced any such resistance when working with people from the former Yugoslavia; though the effects of past relationships were felt as dependency in the Schlaining meeting, and had to be resisted. I believe that both in Beirut and in Schlaining the actual experience of co-operative relations largely overcame these negative effects. They do indicate the need, however, for encouraging the use of local capacities wherever possible.

At Balaton, I felt altogether welcomed and had a clear, agreed role to fulfil. Although I felt afterwards that I had carried too much power and responsibility, I believe that at the time I managed it well and was of real service.

Not surprisingly, in these workshops what I learned in practice about respect and conflict felt more important than what I learned in theory. In Beirut the conflict remained low key, and was present, under the surface, at many levels. In Schlaining the big political conflict was felt not in itself but in its effects of emotional exhaustion, which called for recognition and care. At Balaton the conflict from which the women came was reflected both in tension between participants and emotional fatigue, and was played out in the conflict which took place within the group - which proved cathartic. At the same time it was that conflict, together with the 'bomb' scare that helped create such a close bond between all members of the group: one which embraced me and the Scandinavian women as well.

The use of the 'stages' diagram and the Goss-Mayr models for preparing nonviolent action proved useful in Beirut, but excitingly powerful at Balaton, enabling the women to recognise their own actual and potential ability to act for change at the political as well as psycho-social level. These models were used to similar effect in my next 'women only' workshop: one which was held on another continent and was characterised, for me, by conflict of a different kind, as I shall discuss in my next chapter.