

*Peacemaking from the Grassroots
in a World of Ethnic Conflict*

MAIREAD CORRIGAN MAGUIRE

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MAIREAD CORRIGAN MAGUIRE has dedicated her life to promoting a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Northern Ireland, and is cofounder of the Community of the Peace People. She was drawn into her leadership position as the result of the tragic death, in August 1976, of two of her nephews and a niece, who were struck and killed on a Belfast street corner by an IRA gunman's getaway car. The driver of the car had been shot dead by a British Army patrol. Working with Betty Williams and Ciaran McKeown, she organized some of the largest peace demonstrations in the history of Northern Ireland, including rallies in Belfast, Derry/Londonderry, Dublin, and London. Working with other leading human rights activists, she also played an important role in the formation of the Committee on the Administration of Justice, a non-sectarian organization that has become a leading advocate for change in the Northern Ireland legal system. A powerful speaker, she has traveled widely throughout the United States and Europe to advance the work of the Peace People. She was a guest speaker at the Third International Conference on Human Rights in Helsinki, and at the invitation of Walter Mondale gave the keynote address at the Peace Prize Forum at Augustana College in 1992. She received the Norwegian People's Prize, and has been awarded honorary doctorates from Yale University, the College of New Rochelle, and St. Michael's College in Vermont. She was named a joint recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976.

I can think of no more urgent subject for us to be discussing today than ethnic conflict. It is not merely a topic that stimulates a passing interest. It is perhaps the greatest challenge facing the human family. What we must consider today is this question: how can we begin to solve nonviolently some of the deep ethnic conflicts in our world today and thus give hope and inspiration to each other?

When the Soviet Union collapsed there was a sense around the world that one repression had stopped and perhaps there was an opportunity for the human family to really begin to make peace, to divert those vast resources allocated to militarism and redirect them to areas of the world where the true enemies of the human family might be tackled—the enemies of collapsing environments, poverty, and inhumanity. At that moment there was great hope in the world that we were a family and perhaps we could make it together.

Tragically, within a very short time, we began to hear of countries such as Chechnya, essentially unknown before, countries in the Soviet Bloc that had been held together by military might, countries suddenly beginning to make their voices heard. Yugoslavia, once united under Tito's regime, soon followed the Soviet Union's dissolution. Suddenly republics appeared having survived seventy years of repression—Slovenia, Bosnia, Herzegovina—strange countries with unfamiliar languages, practising little-understood religions. We soon discovered that these countries had survived decades of repression with historic hatreds intact, and the people were armed, and that internal conflict was actually easy due to the availability of armaments to be used against each other or against outsiders.

At this point in time we began to realise that nuclear and conventional weapons and our armies were absolutely no use in these

situations. One cannot drop a nuclear bomb on an ethnic conflict. The weapons we have developed, as a means of solving our problems, are no longer of any use to us.

This became ever more evident to me when, in 1995, I travelled to Burundi in Africa. I was part of a small delegation of women from Ireland who were invited into the country in order to see, from inside the country, the situation at a true and intimate level. There was enormous pressure to send in the United Nations from the international community, which was deeply concerned that Burundi would follow the path taken by Rwanda, leading certainly to genocide.

This pressure was exacerbated by the international world press, which would lead its television broadcasts with images of refugees fleeing from Burundi. Upon our arrival we discovered terrible problems in Burundi: people were fleeing and the army had killed people in their villages. We asked the people, "How can the outside world help? What can we do?" They very clearly responded, "Don't send us any guns. Don't send us any military forces. The place is awash with guns and while, in these refugee camps, our children need food and we haven't enough money ourselves to buy food, a child with a few cents can buy a weapon. For too long the West has given us weaponry. Send us no more." This was a plea from the heart. The Burundi people said their ethnic/political problem cannot be solved by any kind of violence.

When I visit a place like the United States of America, I stress how very important it is to recognise that we are interconnected in these ethnic conflicts: what happens in a place like Burundi literally affects all of us around the world. We play a key role in Burundi; let us not forget that eighty-five percent of the weapons being sold to Third World countries come from the USA and the European community.

Eighty-five percent of the weapons going to poor Third World countries come from the wealthy "First World" nations. We must delude ourselves no longer; we are arming the Third World. In

return, a high percentage of their budgets and international aid is coming back to the West. While some of these countries cannot feed their people, they can and do buy our guns and send our money back to us. By any reckoning, this is so unjust and causes so much suffering. The world's people have got to unite their voices to stop this genocide of the poor today.

Some years ago together with a delegation of Nobel Laureates, I visited refugee camps on the Thai/Burma border. In the refugee camp, we listened to stories of Karen women who had been taken out of their villages by force and made to act as human porters by the Burmese soldiers. Many of these women told us of how they had themselves been raped by Burmese soldiers and witnessed killings and massive abuse of human rights of the ethnic minorities and Burmese dissidents by the Burmese military. This is again a situation of political/ethnic conflict where Western interests are interwoven.

In the mid-1970s, the Burmese military was on the brink of financial collapse but was kissed alive by Western oil companies (French and American) investing in Burma. The military use much of the oil revenue to buy military equipment to control and kill many Burmese and ethnic nationals. We are fast moving into a world where big businesses, etc., are controlling national and international economies and are in danger of becoming more politically powerful than national and international governments and political institutions.

In Northern Ireland our situation is one of deep ethnic/political problems. If we do not begin to understand the forces behind this ethnicity and to try to control them, we will find ourselves in a very dangerous situation. Too often the media and others within the island of Ireland look at Northern Ireland and create excellent propoganda by implying that ours is a conflict between the British government and the Irish Republican Army. This is not true! Historically, when the Troubles started in the North of Ireland in 1969, people died on the streets of Belfast before the British army

was brought in. And in 1969, when the British army was brought in, the Irish Republican Army was barely in existence and unarmed. Nearly two years passed before the Irish Republican Army became a real guerrilla armed force in the North of Ireland. So we should lay to rest all the imagined intrigues about the British government and the British army and the Irish Republican Army.

Allow me to give you a glimpse at what actually happened between the people in Northern Ireland before these influences and forces began to fight with each other.

I will paint a broad picture because there isn't enough time to explore in detail the history. Northern Ireland is a community of only one and a half million people. Of this population, one million are Protestants who call themselves Unionists, who are British, who want to maintain links with the British government, who would die before they would agree to joining a united Ireland, who would die before they would agree to drop their links with Britain because that is their heritage and roots.

Northern Ireland also has a minority community representing one-third of its population. This minority group is Catholic and nationalist, who are aggrieved by the fact that seventy-five years ago Ireland was partitioned and they were separated from their hinterland, who are very conscious that they have been treated for a long time as second-class citizens, who are very proud to be Irish.

A very deep fear developed between people of two distinct ethnic groups who have lived apart for seventy-five years. Ethnicity and identity are characteristics that can be extremely dangerous when disturbed. It is fine to be very proud of one's identity when living in a quiet community, but once a conflict situation arises, when two communities begin to threaten each other because population figures are shifting towards an equal balance, then identity and ethnicity can become quite murderous. We must never underestimate the human being's capacity for absolute murder! Each one of us is murderous given the right circumstances and that is why we quickly need to learn and understand nonviolence.

Visitors to Northern Ireland find our situation quite confusing. They meet people who are white, Christian, very friendly, very civil —peace-loving people. People who visit our country cannot understand how, in 1969, these seemingly peace-loving people actually burned each other out of their homes. But due to the fact that we have been divided, that the level of fear is so high, and that the siege mentality resides in Northern Ireland, we are, in fact, absolutely capable of killing each other. Therefore, anyone working within the field of identity and ethnicity must see the importance of moving individuals above these tribal instincts.

It is fine to celebrate our diversity and our roots, but somehow we must rise above those ideas that divide us so that we may begin to work together and understand the most important identity that we have: we are the human family. Surely what we have in common is more important than what divides us. Surely as a human family we can find ways to build bridges and work together. Celebrate our diversity, yes, but always recognise that we are men and women who are interconnected in our world today, that each of us is more important than the flags and the religions, and somehow we must rise above these things that have kept us so divided.

In order to overcome the fear of differences and learn to celebrate diversity we need to study and understand nonviolence. My journey in Northern Ireland, searching and asking the questions of what it means to live in West Belfast in this particular historic period, has meant that I have had to question everything, absolutely everything. I grew up in an area where some people accepted as fact that young men joined the IRA, arguing that there was such a thing as a just war. This thinking included justifications such as: Haven't churches always blessed war? or When you live in a situation of state injustice, it is right to arm yourself and work for justice. I grew up seeing state injustice, and I grew up believing that I could not sit back —that no one should sit back —doing nothing because doing nothing is in itself wrong. But could I ever take up arms?

To deal with these issues, I went on my own spiritual journey and came to recognise that life is sacred; each human life is sacred; we are involved in a mystery that is life; and we are given life as a gift and we have no right to take that gift from another human being. I also came to my absolute belief that, as a Christian, the greatest symbol of nonviolence was Jesus hanging on a cross saying, Love your enemy and do not kill —a very simple message that Christians lived out for the first 300 years of Christianity, but tragically have moved away from since the third century.

I believe that the major religions of the world stem from roots of love, tolerance, respect, and nonviolence. Therefore I passionately believe that the only way to accomplish real change is through the power of love operating in the world.

How do we solve our problems without killing each other? At home in Northern Ireland we try to accomplish this through teaching nonviolence at every level of our society—courses on conflict resolution, prejudice reduction, human rights. This is a new direction for us. Within the human family, we teach our children reading, writing, and arithmetic from the time they are very young so that when they grow up they will be literate. Yet why, when they are very young, don't we teach them conflict resolution, peacemaking, prejudice reduction? Why don't we teach them about the world's different faiths, religions, and creeds? In teaching respect for life and respect for diversity we will create a tolerant and more compassionate world.

I firmly believe that we must teach nonviolence at every level of our society—in the home, which is surely where it starts, in the community, at universities and colleges, and in the country. We must begin building a nonviolent world.

In Northern Ireland we desperately need to build community. The only solution in a deep ethnic conflict, the only way to reduce fear, is to increase tangible human contact by bringing people together. Certainly we have the Internet and television, which are marvellous technologies, but they must not be a supplement and

they cannot be a replacement for human contact. That would be a lazy and dangerous road to take. The human being needs to be loved and to love, to feel a sense of dignity, acceptance, and respect.

Human beings know when they are being treated with contempt by another whether or not words are spoken. The human being is expert at body language, expert too at picking up the vibes. More than economics, social status, or jobs, never underestimate the worth or importance of human dignity shared between individuals, communities, and nations. Respect for human dignity and human diversity are much needed to be taught in today's world — we were never taught this; we never learned to share this.

Respect for human dignity can be realised only when people communicate directly with one another. For this to occur, there can be no dramatic overnight solutions. Let us look at Belfast, a city where fourteen walls sadly help keep our people segregated. Our schools are segregated too. This of course leads to fear and mistrust. We have to do all we can to build trust; one of our programmes is that we transport, by bus, Loyalist and Republican wives and children to visit their relatives in the prisons. This bus takes people from one community to another community and allows individuals who often feared each other to sit, ride, and communicate.

There are tragic cases of violence and oppression when there is no respect for dignity, no understanding or communication. East Timor, one of the most tragic countries in our world today, is a tiny country that was invaded twenty years ago by Indonesia. One-third of its population has been cruelly murdered and Indonesia continues its colonisation practices while the world does little to help. Bishop Belo, a dedicated spokesperson for the East Timorese people, visited us in Belfast in late 1995. I took him to West Belfast and showed him the walls between Catholic and Protestant communities. Bishop Belo kept saying, But these are a Christian

people. These people are Christians. Why are there walls between Christian people?

When people are not communicating with one another, or listening to each other to alleviate their fears, then fear increases. In Northern Ireland we seem to have lost the ability to hear the other person. When the ceasefire was called eighteen months ago, I went to the Falls Road, where the Catholic community was saying, The ceasefire is wonderful. We can move forward for a real change. There was a real sense of euphoria. Then I went to the Protestant Shankill, where a young minister confided to me, It's a sad day for the Protestant people here. A deal has been done between the British and the IRA. He was so fearful that somehow he and his community were being sold out.

This inability to listen has made us culturally deaf and blind in one ear and one eye so that we can no longer sense what the other person is feeling. Our very language divides. Our Protestant or Catholic traditions use language so differently. The word "justice," for example, has a completely different meaning for Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. Therefore, when we attempt to tackle issues such as prisoner release, or police reform, we approach them from completely different perspectives and different priorities. This makes the work much more difficult. We have got to learn to listen and stay together as we move forward.

The only hope for nonviolence is building community. Once people feel that they can and do make a difference, and are important in their communities, they will feel a sense of power. They can then be powerful in the right sense of the use of that word, not abusers of power. So how do we give people in their communities that sense of power? We must, from the bottom up, build community nonviolently to really begin to break down at the top what we have as ethnic politics.

Northern Ireland is home to one and a half million people — about 600 tiny villages, each with populations of about 2,000 people. It will be only when these villages begin to mobilise, to solve

problems, to elect local citizens to represent them, to develop resources and finances for jobs, etc., that nonviolence will grow out of their sense of empowerment. Having finances, resources, and power at this grassroots level allows communities to feel they can make a difference. Only then can they begin to solve problems nonviolently. These citizens feel free to go over to the different community, reach out, and share the road that connects one to the other.

In Northern Ireland we have never voted on a social economic spectrum; we've voted on "the flag" —for nationalism or for unionism. If we return to a devolved government based on ethnic division, we may have a stalemate for the next ten or fifteen years, until someone comes along to remind us of our differences. Then, once again, our fragile country will blow apart. Changing politics from the bottom up is therefore not only idealistic but essential for a peaceful future.

I believe we can effect this change because we are a highly disciplined, good community. Before the trouble started we had about 200 prisoners! We believe that once the guns are taken out of Irish politics, once everyone is brought into the dialogue, we will go forward. Yes, identities are changing as a Northern Irish identity evolves, the result of two communities coming together for resolution, and political change. In seventy-five years of partition, things have changed.

Still the Unionists fear they will be pulled into a unitary Ireland, but there will be no unitary Ireland in the foreseeable future. The Nationalists fear they will be pulled back into an unjust government as before, but there can be no going back to injustice. The hope lies in the growing recognition that we are of two main traditions and growing minority groups — and that there must be a pluralist political movement —not majoritarianism. There is now a recognition that majoritarianism in divided societies is not democracy and doesn't work.

We are moving forward in Northern Ireland; we have a great deal of hope. We hope to solve, nonviolently, our ethnic political

problem, giving a sense of safe future to our people. There will be hiccups, of course; changing attitudes will be a life's commitment and all sides must be prepared to change and to give a little. It will not be easy, but we believe we have no alternative.

What can the ordinary person do? What can one individual do? First and foremost, we each must find time to examine our own spiritual values, because a personal revolution must precede any other change. Once we understand our own religious convictions, we assess if we truly believe in what we profess. Do we really believe in love and reconciliation and forgiveness, or are we bogged down and cemented in old attitudes, old ways, and old thinking? The need for self-reflection is obvious as we witness new spiritual movements arising in our world today, especially among the young. As they move away from traditional religions, we realise that there are many paths to God. We have to allow people to find their own way, provide the space for something new to grow.

As individuals, in our own lives we should examine our own spirituality through our prayer, also listen for the voices of today's prophets. Regard the doomsday voices and scenes of devastation on television with balance. For even in the midst of devastation, there is hope for the world. On the streets of Burundi I saw great hope. Young Americans were in the refugee camps with their mobile phones and aid trucks, working in partnership with the Burundi people and helping them where and when asked to do so. In the heart of the forests of Burma I saw young Americans helping pro-democracy students work the Internet and learning from them. It is a two-way process now and we all have to learn from each other. You don't see these heartwarming stories on television.

This is as true and important to know and see as the disturbing accounts, and it is happening all around our world today. We are interconnected; we are helping; there is real growth taking place and real compassion in and for humanity that does not often appear on television. The media, especially television, have to be

made accountable and responsible. Pictures that television news crews sent around the world from Burundi showed a country burning, a civilisation falling apart. The world watched with utter helplessness. However, what news crews chose not to broadcast was the Burundi people working to solve their problems with great courage, with great dignity.

With great dignity they will continue to deal with their problems —in their way, in their time. Western nations exude an arrogance to people who are barefoot; we feel they have nothing to offer but rather need, desire what we have to give. We have no right to impose Western models on these new political movements ; yes, we can help, but only on their terms, not ours.

Wonderful changes are taking place in our world today, but with great care we must learn to recognise prophetic voices, those politicians prepared to serve their people by providing political leadership in service, not only to their people, but to the world. The United States of America should not close its back or its doors to the rest of the world; you have too much to offer. Find political leadership that will be prophetic, men and women who will give hope, and help lead the human family toward a new horizon. As Martin Luther King tried to build the “beloved community,” encourage those leaders who have as their goal and vision to build the “beloved community” with all the nations of the world.

The United States needs to be reminded not to value materialism too highly in a very poor world. Growth cannot be everlasting because the cake is too small. The Western world has kept the vast majority of the cake for so long, leaving nothing for our brothers and sisters in the Third World countries. This must change and we must be prepared to change, make sacrifices, go without, and share what we have. We have to do without that second helping, because the world can no longer afford the excesses of several cars, several houses, of people living a high lifestyle. Unless we are prepared to live simply so others may simply live then things will not change.

I believe that there is movement towards reassessing, reaffirming, and “refinding” spiritual values that provide us with the strength to demand social justice, for a community without social justice is a community that will never have peace. Violence is only the symptom. What we have to understand is what drives people to take a gun, people who for so long have held anger and frustration in, who bear more than their share of injustice, inhumanity, and unfairness.

Eventually they explode and their community explodes as a result. I pray to God that America can defuse the bomb before the explosion, for once the evil genie of violence gets out of the bottle, it is very nearly impossible to get it back in again. Be aware of the signs for they are here.

You know what to do —make real changes and work tirelessly as we do in the streets of Belfast. We knock on doors; we sell our little paper and build peace in Belfast one home, one family at a time. We will know that you are doing the same here in the United States, as people are doing it in Burundi, as people are doing it in Burma. Together the human family can build a civilised world.