

Caux, Monday 15<sup>th</sup> July 2002

Dear friends,

An impertinently intoxicated blackbird, full of the joys of life, woke me even before my alarm clock. To admire the dark rain-clouds over mountain and lake – or to get me to work on my computer? It's true that there's an awful lot to tell, the pace has hardly slowed. During the first conference, there were meetings and workshops on the indigenous peoples of Russia. For the first time, I met and talked with a Buryat, from Buryatia, on the borders with Mongolia, where a direct ancestor served as a missionary nearly two hundred years ago. There were moments of quiet in the hall, where all that could be heard was the birdsong from the garden. There were sketches, for example a true story from the Ukraine about students bribing their teachers to pass their exams, and the struggle to apply honesty. Another day it was the emperor's new clothes, and a reflection on our leaders and image making, and daring to tell the truth. The closing variety evening saw a bored sultan rubbing his magic lamp and calling for amusements and entertainments – but concluding at the close that even sultans can learn to serve!

One friend told me that he'd counted that there were over 60 Russian-speakers in the house. An older western European friend expressed his joy at his continent taking on its rightful dimensions, with the Slavs and their languages taking their place here. Cornelio Sommaruga expressed his deep sympathy for the victims and their families in the terrible air disaster over Lake Constance, where many young Russians died, partly perhaps through mistakes made by Swiss. 'These days have encouraged and helped me to maintain the balance between humanity and profits and success,' said a German with 30 years experience in business, evaluating the day spent on 'Service, Responsibility and Leadership' in business. A young Russian spoke of their need 'to forgive ourselves for our Soviet past'. 'There is a bitterness that we keep in our hearts,' he said. One young British woman concluded, 'I can't wait to come again', and hoped that she'd have learnt to speak another language. 'I'll know my way around the house, and I'll be able to concentrate more on the workshops,' she said at the closing meeting, 'I've done so much, but I couldn't remember what I'd done until now.' After the end of the first conference, there were some further meetings on the future of Foundations for Freedom.

So 'Service, Responsibility and Leadership' has ended, it seems a hundred years ago, on Wednesday, and we're well into 'Connecting Communities', which opened with a tour of the house on Friday afternoon, and which closes on Thursday morning. Last night, we had a third 'Caux Lecture' (see the press release attached – the previous releases are to be found on the Caux Web site). A Korean American, talking about his commitment to the struggle for racial justice and for reconciliation – it was a fitting symbol of the people and the atmosphere in the house. Syngman Rhee spoke movingly of the holy ground on which he was standing, and he removed his shoes on the platform. At the end of his lecture, Paige Chargois, in thanking him, invited the audience to take off their shoes – and in a few minutes, there was the unusual sight of rows of shoes covering the steps to the platform.

I've still not mastered the art of being in several places at once, so I've had to make difficult choices, like everyone else. So yesterday afternoon, I went to the first of three workshops on 'The West's response to asylum seekers'. There were refugees, from Albania, Congo and Iraq, the latter a former general, volunteer workers, elected officials and civil servants, policemen and



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housewives. It is estimated that 185 million people now live in countries other than the one of their birth – I must be one of them. But of course millions have not freely chosen, have been driven from home by war or famine.

A plenary panel discussion looked at the questions around the integration – and exclusion – of Muslim communities in Europe. On the platform were a Dutch Muslim leader, and a senior German civil servant, with a Dutch local politician as moderator. Yesterday, we heard examples of grassroots initiatives to fight exclusion, ending with an African American Southern Baptist minister – ‘can anyone mistake me for anything other than black?’ he asked. It was something of a culture shock for many – but he warned us that for him the line between speaking and preaching was sometimes hard to draw! With a white colleague, they together told how they had dealt with a Klu Klux Klan march through their town – the African American, the first non-white mayor in a majority white city, had refused to ban the march. But had mounted a counter-demonstration that had served as the starting point for what they now call ‘the unity community’. A senior black civil servant from Britain challenged, ‘It’s easy to say what we’re against, but what are we for?’ The style of many of the meetings has been of dialogue, with ‘roving microphones’ encouraging the audience to question and make comments, to share their own experiences.

In a moment of considerable emotion, at the opening meeting, ‘a southern gentleman of Confederate sentiments’ presented an engraving of a painting he’d made of black and white responding to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center twin towers of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. With sensitivity and gentleness, a black British encouraged us to remember *all* the innocent victims of violence, all over the world.

Yesterday’s protestant church service was taken by a team of six, from five countries and four denominations. The preacher talked of the Tower of Babel, and God’s plan of diversity – but the need of His spirit if we are to start to understand the other. Real dialogue, real honest conversations are rare. They can rarely take place on the platform, in the public eye. But especially in the communities, in smaller groups, over meals, honest conversations are breaking out, are multiplying.

I’ve managed to squeeze in my first run up the mountain. I have to report that despite the cold, wet spell we’re having, nature is far advanced, perhaps three weeks ahead of the norm. The verges have been cut, and the orchids massacred, gone, all gone. Already in June, the wheat fields around the village where I live had been harvested, and here the roses are in full bloom, so that the flower team can do a splendid job in beautifying the house.

Over the last two days, a steady flow of people having been arriving to visit the house, claiming that a major paper in the region (that now of us had seen) had announced this. After three guided tours yesterday, the first of which dragged me away from my lunch table, I finally made it to my computer, to look up the Web site of the said newspaper (24 Heures). And I started to understand the confusion. The article talked about last weekends open day, and correctly gives the opening times of the Caux Expo, but the headline is ‘The house on the hill opens it’s doors – discovering a place 100 years old whose walls breathe memories’. We’d wanted a sense of welcome and openness to spread in the region – so we can’t complain about success! We’ll just have to work out how to handle it!

We thank you for your prayers and thoughts, as we race on with wonder into this summer that seems beyond summary, and beyond the control of any one of us. With you, we move forward in trust.

Andrew Stallybrass