

Caux, Monday 28th July 2003

Dear friends,

This letter marks the halfway point through the summer here: three letters before it, and three more to come. Dark clouds partially hide the lake, after some torrential and welcome rain yesterday, cooling off the still-high summer heat. Swiss farming is suffering from a major drought, and there has been a steady stream of accidents in the Alps, with climbers hurt or killed by falling rocks – the Alps are largely held together by ice, and the ice is melting at higher and higher altitudes.

Today several of us will be slipping away from the conference to say goodbye to a 97-year-old friend of the house who has finally and peacefully taken his leave – Willy Brandt. At the end of the family conference, for three days running I was asked to do tours of the house, and so showed people the pile of keys in the Caux Expo and the photo of Willy's father and an apprentice, mending all the locks in Mountain House in 1946. And then we stopped in the hall, and I drew people's attention to the magnificent chandelier and the light fittings on the wall, one among many of Willy's contributions to the home. We noted that Jacky and his wife had been here for the CCBI, and that Marianne Brandt, a long-time helper, who worked with MRA in Caux and Geneva, was coming shortly, and that the 4th generation were expected to come and help with the Caux open day early next month. There can't be all that many families so closely linked with Caux over so many years.

The house has gone through another major transition, with the average age rising as the horde of smaller children leave with their parents. We miss them, but there are already plans for another family conference in two years time. There were close on fifty Norwegians in the house, and a fair number of other Scandinavians. Nine of those at the heart of it all had been in the Scandinavian Revue that was prepared in Caux, before touring in Scandinavia, a hundred years ago, it seems, to oldies like me. Those of us not speaking Nordic languages were somewhat handicapped! Someone talked about 'the language of love', and perhaps there's been a lot of that to help us understand each other. On the picnic/outing day, I was sitting in the front hall when a very small boy of perhaps four years came up to me and chatted away in a language that I understood not a single word of. I tried to look intelligent and say 'ja' at appropriate intervals, and he seemed to go away happy. He came back a few minutes later and gave me a sweet, and then went on to share his sweets with all the others in the hall. So I thought he was challenging us all to practise one of the qualities that we talk about here!

In last week's letter, I mentioned the workshop on Orthodox spirituality. An Australian participant said that he would use what he'd learnt in his daily times of quiet. A group of Latin American ladies told how they had prayed through the years of communism that Russia would one day be free. For them, the relatively peaceful change was a miracle. Certainly I rejoice that we are quietly working to bridge one of the great divides that still marks our old continent.

There was a clown, Petunia, and a puppet show on stage for the children, in the first, all-ages part of the meeting, with small children grouped along the front of the stage. Apology, healing, reconciliation, deep subjects and deep questions, but entered into with freshness and imagination so that all could find new perspectives. 'Grandparents need sons-in-law and daughters-in-law,' said one grandmother, who sent on to speak with moving and unusual gratitude as a mother-in-law of the three women that her sons had chosen. 'They've brought so much into our family,' she said. An African told of writing a letter to put things right with her father: 'He thought that I must have malaria!' 'I can't go on living with my resentments, or I start hating myself,' concluded a young stepmother, speaking with painful honesty from her



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own experience of a reconstituted family. 'We must plant the seeds of peace in our children,' said a Croatian, introducing a seminar on overcoming the traumas of conflict. An 80+ single lady said 'I have a family too. I have nephews and nieces. I need them and they need me.'

On the back of the stage, over the week, there was a growing village of small cardboard houses, made by different families, as a way of introducing themselves. Then dwarfing the houses, a church appeared, to some puzzlement. Did one family live in a church? But no, this family had misunderstood their instructions, but felt that any village needed a spiritual centre, and so had decided to build a church, to a highly original design, with a skateboard park on the roof, which was also designed to collect water!

The spectacular thunderstorms included one direct hit on Mountain House, late at night, which sounded the alarm in our manager's home down the hill. Hurrying onto his balcony, he looked up towards the mountains and had the terrible shock of seeing flames. His worst nightmare seemed to be coming to pass. Then another flash of lightening showed him that a tree higher up the mountain had been hit and was burning, but that the Centre seemed to be intact! All of the phone lines were out for some time, and the switchboard needed repairs.

A highly original variety evening, with two never-seen-before in Caux actions songs, one with small children, brought the family conference to a close. Then there was a final evening out on the lawn, with more games and songs, including an orgy of balloon-bursting. One morning at breakfast I was seated next to someone in a hurry to join his cook team. 'The crazy thing is that I love it,' he said to me as he hurried off. 'This is the world that I want to live in. This is the world that I want to build for future generations,' said a Colombian grandmother.

Then we were into the preparations for the next conference, and for myself, a rise in the adrenalin levels, since I am one of the team carrying it. On Saturday evening we opened '*The spiritual factor in secular society*' seminar, with a hall full of people again seated around tables, and an original backdrop created by the Dutch artist Hester Mila-Groeneweg, inspired by the thinking of the Dutch priest Henry Nouwen, 'From the house of fear to the house of love, from conflict to community'. John Taylor, a senior figure of ecumenical and inter-religious circles gave a splendid scene-setting talk, and he was followed by Imam Sajid, another of the conference organizers, who spoke of his own bridge-building experiences between the Hindu and Muslim communities in Brighton, England. Yesterday, German theologian Reinhard Kirste gave a further broad-sweeping look at secularism in its different forms, and the challenges facing Europe. On our tables was a list of extremely stimulating questions, in three languages, that brought the theory down to the personal level of each one of us, and stimulated the discussions in the community groups. As the Scandinavians were the largest group last week, so this time, it's the Dutch who have come in numbers, with Hennie de Pous as the motor. There's a high level of expectation, and the hall is filled on time (or shortly after) for each event.

Another highlight was the Protestant church service broadcast live from the little chapel of Caux, filled with parishioners from Montreux and participants from the conference. The broadcast started with an interview about Caux and *Initiatives of Change*, and I had been invited to give the sermon. A highlight was prayers in seven different languages from conference participants – in Arabic for peace in the Middle East, in Roumanian for the Orthodox churches and all our churches, in Ibo for healing in Africa, and in Croatian for the Balkans, in Spanish and Polish and English.

Warm regards from a fresher Caux,

Andrew Stallybrass