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pour le Réarmement moral

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Caux, 16.07.01

Dear friends,

It's cold. Autumn weather - it poured through most of yesterday. Last night's concert was accompanied by a constant heavy drumming on the roof, and this morning through the clouds I can see a fresh dusting of snow far down the Dents du Midi. Scott Murray, the American contemporary folk-singer and songwriter, gave us a profound evening of his songs, stories of life from his native Virginia in the theatre, stopping several times to remark how glad he was to be inside, or to just to listen to downpour. He quoted Gunnar Soderlund: 'Music is the anti-virus of the soul.'

My aches from wild Moldovan dancing have given way to other aches from a first run up the hill. The verges of the paths and tracks have already been cut, and the meadows will soon be moved down, finishing the last of the summer flowers. But the clearing of the growth reveals the winking red fingernails of wild strawberries, and there's the promise of a rich harvest of raspberries to come - all we need is a bit of warmth and sun! And in any case, the roses are superb, with every corner of the house displaying artistic flower arrangements. So another week begins, the first handing over of the baton, with a second conference starting on Saturday - the Caux Conference for Business and Industry.

Friday morning saw a rich and full final meeting of the 'Freedom, Leadership and Responsibility' conference. A highlight of the week had been the 'point-fixe' meetings, which I hurried not to miss: clarity and humour for the announcements, before real spiritual teaching from a team that Philip Boobbyer enlisted. We saw how atheistic materialism has tried and failed to kill God; how faith worked its way through the cracks into people's lives. A Russian ex-army officer likens our lives to a car - you can push it along, with a lot of effort (at least on the flat), but it's made to go faster. Where do we find the fuel to drive as we're meant to on the open road, he asks, sharing from his own experience of faith. A Ukrainian professor speaks of the moral dilemmas of the post-Soviet era. 'Who is a friend? Who is an enemy? And above all, where can I find cheap sausages?' Money becomes the first and only aim, there's a loss of beliefs, of direction; no one trust anyone else. We have to rebuild our thinking, he says. It is like walking on the blade of a sword, another suggests.

Are we so different here, I ask myself, in our part of the European continent? I'd say from this week that there's a strong sense of a collective crisis to the East - a civilization facing massive challenges and changes. I think of the slogan of the MRA campaign that moved from Caux into the ruins of Germany in 1947: 'Everything *must* be different - Everything *can* be different'. In our wealthy, comfortable countries, our crises are individual, personal. We have little sense of a civilization in crisis. Yet it seems to me that it is. We lack the sense of a collective need - and thus a collective will to work for change.

A variety evening described by an old Caux hand as 'The best I've ever seen', took us on a journey round the world, to most of the countries and regions in the house, many of the amateur artists being encouraged and supported by their community groups. Then on

the last morning, a time of quiet in the house prepared us to share what this first week had meant to us. The chairs are moved into a semi-circle, and there are roving microphones for those who hesitate to stand up front. 'I've had a time of quiet each morning here. Before, I thought that it was important, but I wasn't doing it,' says one of the large group of young Moldovans, thanking his roommate for the experience of sharing together. An American talks of his me-centred prison, and of the paradox that a self-centred life seemed to lead him to being 'a miserable, miserable person'. There seems to be a power that can free and turn us towards others – and this leads to real satisfaction, he says.

A student from Siberia, one of an outstanding group who've provided sketches for many of the meetings, says that this conference wasn't at all as she'd feared: 'Men in suits waiting for a coffee break and hiding behind long and impossible-to-understand words.' 'I've made peace with myself here; I don't know how long it will last,' she says. She stresses the total experience, the way the work in the kitchen or on service had for her been part the sharing, the exchange, the making of friends. Another suggests a reworking of Einstein's famous equation $E = mc^2$. Energy, Experience, Excitement, Effort, Experiment, Exhaustion = Many great people x Caux second floor – the dining room and the kitchen.

'This time has helped me to find a faith,' says a young Albanian mathematician. 'The only way to change an evil system in a lasting way is from inside. I've given my life to God. I feel strong because I'm never alone.' A Ukrainian former research scientist, now a church minister and a community activist, talks of the need to increase our noise-signal ratio, through the practice of silence – reduce the interference and background noise in our lives and increase the signal from God or conscience that's trying to get through. After Caux last year, a young Ukrainian found that her friends were sceptical about her experiences in Caux, but her conclusion this year was to 'stop speaking, just act'. A Pole shares her vision of a Europe made whole. Who in 1946 would have believed that the enemies of the war would come together, she asks, that France and Germany would live without borders between them? We end up picking up a thread from the floor that links us all together, and take away with us the cut section we were holding as a reminder of the bonds that bind us.

We struggle to give the fullness of a spiritual message, while respecting and cherishing our differences. A young Muslim woman from France quotes two verses from the Koran. 'The religions must be a factor for peace,' she says. She's using music and the arts as a means to promote values. Another Muslim discovers the room set aside for Muslim prayers. 'This is more than perfect, more than a room,' he comments. 'It is a mosque.' Three Africans speak, and a Chinese – the other continents are also present.

Many friends have left, but quite a number of those from the eastern part of Europe are staying for the *Foundations for Freedom* summer programme – some thirty, from Russia, Ukraine and Moldova. They are meeting daily, training in different aspects of teamwork, and planning for future initiatives, while also taking part in the Junior Round Table and other forums. One highlight of their week was an outing to Geneva, including a visit to the United Nations.

This next business and industry conference is harder to report, since so much of the life of it is in the different forums (fora?), and I can only be in one at a time. This year marks the tenth anniversary of the International Communications Forum, and an important group has gathered to honour Bill Porter's initiative and seek the way ahead. Bill in his usual humorous style lists the host of accidents and physical disasters that he's had to overcome to keep going, but more seriously, the treasurer details the massive 'investments' for the future of his grandchildren from Bill's own savings and pension that had kept the operation going.

Warm greetings from a distinctly cool Caux, Andrew Stallybrass