The Role of Women in International Peace-building from Northern Ireland

by Ruth Patterson, OBE

In September of this year I had the privilege of being involved in a retreat with Jean Vanier, the founder of L’Arche, a movement for people with learning disabilities. The ethos of L’Arche is that the poor, the little, and the broken of the world are God’s gift to us in that they reveal the truth about ourselves—namely that we are all poor and little and broken, but we also all are the beloved. At one point in the retreat, Jean talked of what he sees as the three realities in life—firstly, the power of hatred, dominated by sadism and responsible for so much anguish and suffering; secondly, the tyranny of normality, characterised by the deafening silence of the good people; and thirdly, the trickle of peacemaking, which so often begins in the family with the littleness of simply accepting the other. He then questioned the relationship between normality and the third reality. What moves us from one to the other? He described it as a “tipping over,” not so much something we do as something that is done for us or to us.1 For me that resonates strongly with the words of Dag Hammarskjöld, former secretary general of the United Nations, who said, “Weep if you must, but do not complain. The way chose you and you must be thankful.”

When I look back over my life, there have been several significant tipping over points. I was ordained to ministry seven years into our recent conflict in Northern Ireland, and I worked for fourteen years in a parish situation in a large housing project dominated by unemployment, relative poverty, and severed relationships, all compounded by loyalist paramilitary activity. While our community received very negative press, we were quietly able to undertake much cross-community and cross-border work, mostly in the area of building the relationships upon which the change of attitudes depends. Much of this was costly but carried with it also great rewards. About a year before I left the parish, I was able to take my Kirk Session (the Elders of the Church) to stay for a weekend with the Carmelite Fathers and Brothers in Dublin. One of my Elders was a member of the Orange Order. I didn't think he would come, but to my surprise and delight, he decided to join us. The event that lingers still so vividly in my mind and heart was when I took all of our party to visit some enclosed Carmelite Sisters who lived nearby and were dear friends of mine. We entered the parlor and sat down. The room was divided in two by a grille. After a few minutes the Sisters came in and sat on the other side. We greeted each other through the grille. They shared with us what it was like to live in an enclosed community, we told them who Presbyterian Elders were and what they did, and then we had a short act of worship together. While we were singing, I chanced to look round the room and saw several of our big, tough men moved to tears. After the more formal proceedings, there was time to relax over a cup of tea, and people began

to converse to and fro across the wire! At one point, I happened to look down to the other end of the room and there, with his nose pressed tight against the wire, was my Orangeman. On the other side was one of the Sisters, similarly employed! It turned out that both of them had been born in Derry. Other barriers were forgotten in the remembrance of the same beloved birthplace. I stood silently and prayed, “Lord, I am witnessing a real miracle of reconciliation. Thank you.” Whatever has happened to those two individuals since that point, I know that their lives will never be the same because of that encounter.

Medieval maps used to have at their edges the words, “Here be dragons.” The dragons of fear and ignorance, of the lust for power and control, of the clinging-on to an external identity as a cover for nakedness—the shame of non-being—are what keep people locked in and silent. Throughout our conflict, there was always the tacit warning: “Whatever you say, say nothing.” But paradoxically, from the edge of the map and the place of marginalisation, it was possible to hear a different incantation, to pick up the often distant drumbeat of mercy, justice, truth, and peace—and to recognize that difference is a gift. God created diversity and saw that it was good. His desire is for unity, not uniformity, and unity is simply diversity embraced by love. And perhaps the only prerequisite to being tipped over is that, in however small a way, we have picked up the vocation to be beloved. Once you know that you are beloved by God, once you enter into that mutuality, that communion of belovedness, then you can’t help but be tipped over. It is this trickle of peacemaking—this life of Jesus—welling up into life in all its fullness and flowing out that is the hope for our weary, anguished, and warring world. It is those who accept their belovedness, leading to a deep humility and an awareness of the light within them, who become the trickle. On first reflection, the trickle seems so small. What possible effect can it have in the face of the two tyrannies of hatred and normality? Well, it’s all there is, and it is enough.

Having said that, it is so easy to be seductively lured back to the tyranny of the normal. There’s a price to pay to remain in the flow, not the least of which is having to sometimes say things people don’t want to hear or experiencing the terrible loneliness of following the Spirit when you’ve moved beyond and no longer belong to the group. Love can lead us to unfamiliar places, different ways of seeing, and uncomfortable insights, risking the loss of other things and people we have held dear. It can challenge our comfort zone, disturb our peace, widen our horizons, and sometimes take us to where we don’t want to go.

In 1988, I had another tipping over to an even greater degree when I helped give birth to a small movement called Restoration Ministries. Three years later, my involvement here would cause me to walk away from parish ministry and the norm that had cost me so much to enter to journey yet again into unknown territory. This organization, for which I still work, arose directly out of the conflict we were living through and was one small response, among many others, to the nightmare of hatred, despair, and fear that was engulfing us like a tidal wave. We take our name from the twenty-third Psalm—“He restores my soul”—and are a non-denominational body promoting peace and reconciliation, largely through the little way of encounter, hospitality, teaching, and prayer. All we can do is to be a little icon of the welcome that is the heartbeat of the Good News and encourage others to do the same. Through the years that have seen our country moving from overt violence into a fragile peace process and, more recently, into a fledgling stability, there have been certain building blocks that have emerged as tried, tested, and essential when everything else is stripped away. They come from a Christian conviction of love for God, neighbour, and self but would also be instantly recognizable also by my sisters from the other faith traditions. Whether they are distinctively the provenance of women I would hesitate to claim. Perhaps all I can say is—and I know this is a broad generalization—that men tend, even in peacebuilding, to focus on the goal—which is totally understandable and laudable—whereas women, still holding the dream, tend to be more aware of the collateral damage along the way. They tend to have that heightened sensitivity to the relational. Fr. Richard Rohr gives weight to this view when
he says that “the capacity to connect and overcome isolation is a gift that, quite frankly, women are much better at.” It’s interesting to note in passing that at least 80 percent of our volunteers/friends at Restoration Ministries are women.

So what are these building blocks? The first is the importance of listening. There are as many stories as there are people. Individuals and indeed whole communities are never going to be able to set their particular burden down and move on until they know that someone has really heard them, has heard their cry, or empowered them to give voice to the silent scream within them. When we award people the dignity and respect of really hearing what they are saying and even what they are “not saying,” when they know that someone is believing them and taking them seriously, that is very often where the process of transformation begins. I can only describe the space we work to create at Restoration Ministries a holy ground—holy because so many people entrust us with their stories. Whenever we listen to these stories, we metaphorically “take off our shoes.” It is a humbling and an awesome thing to realize that people find us to be a place and people of hospitality and safety, where they are welcomed with respect, compassion, and equality.

Linked to listening and equally essential is the building and nurturing of relationships. Right relationships are fundamental to any peacebuilding process. Dialogue with God, dialogue with the diverse parts of my own inner being and dialogue with the “other” gives courage and encourages walls to come down and bridges to be built. When there is such freedom of movement, “back and forth” relationships are nurtured that will hold when crisis or difficulty next strike, as strike they will. That is the nature of this terrible, shining, and wonderful world in which we live. These relationships don’t happen overnight. It takes years of keeping on keeping on and simply being aware of and sensitive to the relational. The foundation of all true community and any peacebuilding is the recognition of a common humanity. If that is not there, then dehumanization of the “other,” who is perceived as different, less than, or even the enemy, can lead very quickly to demonization, legitimizing all actions. No matter what conflict situation we look at in the world, there always comes a time when people have to pick their way back over the corpses, devastation, and anguish, and say to one another, “You are welcome. It is good that you are here.”

If we are truly seeking to listen and to nurture relationships with others, then we also have to be listening to ourselves and building relationships with our own inner beings. The biggest reconciliation journey I will ever make and the toughest act of peacebuilding is the one within me. We cannot translate the theory of hospitality and put concepts like compassion and respect into practice unless we have at least started on a journey of what it means to show hospitality to oneself, especially the parts that we either don’t know or have a hard time liking. In Northern Ireland, even although we have entered a new and exciting era, we still have what are incongruously called “peace walls.” Their function is to keep one side separate from the other. The motivation is fear of attack, and that fear is fuelled by ignorance. Had the two communities not been strangers but rather had built relationships, then the violence that has been the experience of both communities would not have reached the momentum that necessitated, or so it was thought, the building of the walls. As in the outer world, so it is in the inner. Whatever name we put on the “community” that dwells within, there are some parts that we either refuse to acknowledge or else banish from our consciousness. We in effect build a peace wall so that we do not need to meet or greet the enemy within. These exiled parts do not go away and, in times of heightened stress or tension, can come out into the open, clamouring to be heard and given a voice. These “strangers” need not necessarily be the frightening or destructive forces we imagine them to be. If from somewhere we find the courage to welcome the exile back, that can be the point where healing begins.

There is a mistaken assumption that to be a peacemaker, one must be involved in some major event or some grand action for which most of us would feel unqualified or even inadequate. The reality is that it is usually the domino
effect of repeated little actions that will sweep away the obstacles to peace, not only for us but in every place and person where there is no peace. Everyone can do something to make a difference. I could give you so many examples but let one suffice. On September 24, 2009, ninety church leaders from different Christian traditions in Ireland met to explore, in the company of Jean Vanier, how we might move forward together in diversity. The defining moment of a grace-filled day came not in an academic discussion or even in people telling their personal stories, but when the entire company became “little” in the presence of one another and washed each other’s feet. The passion and gentleness of Jesus were translated into this humble act of service to one another. More than any words could have done, it united people across age-old divides. In the natural world, this was such a little act. In the unseen world, I believe that ancient walls began to crumble.

The fifth building block for peace and the one on which all others depend is prayer. I believe that prayer is a work of peace and that it was decades of prayer of all the faithful people, not just in Ireland but from around the world, that created the seismic shift that enabled the politicians in London, Dublin, and Belfast to bring us to where we are today, the beginning of another chapter in Ireland’s history. Every day at twelve noon we stop whatever we are doing and gather round the kitchen table. We light a candle, and we pray for peace in Ireland and the world, as well as for the many people who contact us with requests. We are conscious as we do so that many of our friends in different countries are joining us in spirit.

In an entry from Etty Hillesum’s diary from her time in the holding camp at Westerbork prior to her being sent to Auschwitz, she writes: “As I walked down those overcrowded corridors today, I suddenly felt the urge to kneel down right there, on the stone floor, among all those people. The only adequate gesture left to us in these times: kneeling down before You. Each day I learn something new about people and realize more and more that the only strength comes, not from others, ‘but from within.’”2 Perhaps in these times, as members of different faith traditions and would-be peacemakers, it is the only adequate gesture left for us too.

As I reflect on the pathway to peace, I, too, am metaphorically brought to my knees when I realize, sometimes with an awesome clarity, that all that has gone before has led to this moment, this now, this tipping over point into that trickle of peacemaking, this restoring of hospitality and this beloved community for which we all yearn. We’re not there yet, but I believe that we in Ireland have a choice, individually and collectively, to fulfill our destiny. We can be a sign of hope for the world by restoring hospitality, a generosity of spirit, and a celebration of unity in diversity, or we can go the way of exclusion and self-protection, battening down the hatches and surrendering to the gods of materialism and secularism. I don’t think it’s too much to affirm that those who have crossed the boundary from two-dimensional living to a three-dimensional world that is totally aware of God can yet build a house where love can dwell and all may safely live. Our house has welcomed many, including the President of Ireland on several occasions and Prince Charles but also, and perhaps more significantly, the families of the disappeared; those whose loved ones were murdered; people who lost livelihood, health, and hope; and many courageous unknowns who simply kept on keeping on through all the anguished years. We have a song to sing from the broken places of our long and tortuous history that may give a similar outrageous hope to others. We could echo the words of the nineteenth-century American philosopher, Josiah Royce, who said, “I believe in the beloved community and in the spirit that makes it beloved, and in the communion of all who are, in will and in deed, its members. I see no such community as yet. Nonetheless, my rule of life is, ‘Act so as to hasten its coming.’”3

---