

## Healing of the Mind, Body and Spirit - Women's Peace Meeting November 2015

Patricia Earle  
January 5, 2016  
WFWP Birmingham/UK



"We live in a society, and a world, of increasing uncertainty and fear, one in which there is so much need for healing in order that we can live peacefully together as part of one human family. 'Healing' was the topic of our Women's Peace Meeting in early November, and the amazing number and diversity of women who attended, 158 in total (!), causing us to run out of both chairs and floor-space, reflected that need and the desire of women generally to both give, and receive, healing. Many women, especially those attending for the first time, shared afterwards that they gained so much strength from coming together in this way, simply from the value of all that was represented in this incredible meeting. We were black, white and brown, from all faiths and none, both young and old, women from the establishment and those seeking asylum, and with more than 50 nationalities represented. Incredible! What a privilege to be in one another's company in such an intimate environment, and with the freedom and trust to be able to share our heart, and express our honest concerns and feelings. This is the product of a 22 year journey, with many ups and downs, but with an invisible force compelling us to continue, and a common thread of a yearning for peace running through everything. It was very encouraging to again see a substantial number of young people coming to the meeting, including several wonderful young women from the Asha Centre in the Forest of Dean who had driven for 2 hours to be with us.

Our three main speakers all work at Birmingham's Queen Elizabeth Hospital, involved in different aspects of care and the healing process. First was Margaret Harries, who described some of the modern facilities at the Queen Elizabeth (QE), a recently built hospital with 1369 beds, containing the largest critical care unit in Europe. As well as being known for its cutting-edge technology, the QE is known for compassion and dignity in the way in which patients are treated, with the hospital and its staff having received several awards for this.

Margaret emphasised that high-tech medicine must be accompanied by 'high-touch' care, and that this is something which must be continuously improved and developed. She said .."We don't get everything right, and if we don't we do something about it". A major emphasis in the care offered is 'seeing the person' and trying to understand all aspects of their life and background in order to provide the appropriate care, making a positive difference in their life and giving them the best chance of healing well. Effort is made to treat everyone with dignity, and not just those who are vulnerable, frail or suffering with dementia. Family members and others who care for the patient are welcome in the hospital, as are many people who volunteer their time to help out, often doing simple, normal things which have great therapeutic value. Margaret concluded with one moving story of a young woman who had lost a leg and received multiple injuries, including severe burns, in a very serious road traffic accident. As a result of the care she had received, she wanted to pay something back and helped to raise money, together with Margaret, by abseiling down the side of a 50-metre high hotel, in spite of having a strong fear of heights!

Maureen Foxall, a local preacher in the Methodist church and a member of the Iona and Corrymeela peace communities, then spoke about her work as a Christian chaplain at the QE. She graduated from the Queen's Foundation in Edgbaston, where most people continue on to become vicars and ministers.

Having had some experience of mental health issues with both family and friends, Maureen felt called to work in that area and did a placement with the Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health Trust. Working at the Juniper Centre, part of Moseley Hall Hospital, she joined together with another talented lady, a violinist, to offer music and creative arts to patients with mental health problems, including some with eating disorders, some in a self-harm ward, and also on a mother-and-baby ward. Using her ability to sing, and with the beauty of her friends' violin, Maureen would offer spirituality through art and music as a form of therapy. This would then provide the possibility for patients to express themselves, and their inner feelings, in a way which was often not possible through words, with many people finding it difficult to talk about their condition and struggles, even to recognised professionals. The opportunity then came up to apply for a role as a Chaplain at the QE, the 'crystal palace on the hill' as Maureen described it! She was awarded the post, and began work on January 20th 2015, joining an inter-denominational team (Pentecostal, Anglican, Methodist and Catholic) and a multi-faith team (Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jewish, Bahai and Pagan) which serve the needs of so many people and their families, both religious and non-religious (atheist and agnostic). Her work consists of the expected and the unexpected, including supporting members of staff, and providing support to patients at what can be the most vulnerable time in their life. As well as being a cheerful presence on the ward, Maureen and the other chaplains can also find themselves sitting quietly with patients in the depths of their pain. Maybe helping people to listen to the 'language of their wounds', both physical and mental, and trying to help them not pine away in the pain of them, but to seek to grow and to live for however long that may be, from the depths of that pain. In relation to God, of whatever name, some people find strength through their faith while others may ask the question 'Where is (my) God in all of this?', and might even lose their faith. Asking 'Why am I suffering?' or 'What wrong have I done?' If God is all-powerful and good, why is there suffering - the age-old question, to which there is no simple answer.



Finally, Maureen spoke of the importance of the chaplain's need for self-care, care of oneself in order to fulfill the role of chaplain, reminding us that even Jesus took the time to go up into the mountains, or out into the desert, to replenish and renew himself.

Rehanah, our third main speaker, began by expressing what a privilege it was to be at the meeting in the presence of so many wonderful ladies, representing so many cultures, faiths, nationalities, colours and backgrounds. "What more beauty is there in the world to see than something like this?" "I see you as my sisters, because my Islamic belief tells me that God created Adam and Eve, and from those two scattered multitudes of people such that we are indeed of the same blood". Rehanah mentioned how easy it is, in leading busy lives, to allow the world to take us away from one another and the essence of our common spirituality. "What a beautiful place to be in now, and to feel that essence amongst us, and that togetherness. We know it deep down inside, but often we forget to express it to one another." In describing how she applied for, and was given, the job of a Muslim chaplain at the Women's Hospital quite some years ago, Rehanah said that she 'took her hat off (scarf!)' to the Manager at that time, for his foresight in recognising the need for a Muslim chaplain and appointing her, rather than any great sense of achievement on her part. Saying that she had enjoyed hearing Margaret 'set the scene' and Maureen's personal experience as a chaplain, Rehanah emphasised the importance of their role in bringing healing and its connection to spirituality. She said that so many people, of faith and no faith, recognise spirituality and appreciate the value, the worth, of having someone at their side who can bring their spirituality to help them in their hour of need. And that what's good chaplains do. It's not just about religion and belief, important though that is, but it's recognising that every human being was born with spirituality which needs to be fed, and if they don't tap into that then very often something is missing. Sitting beside people,

talking to them, caring for them, allowing them to be who they are, enables them to feel a connection to something deep inside themselves, and they can understand the importance of it in both their physical and spiritual healing. It's about the value of one human being towards another. Many people with a belief, when struck by some severe illness, find themselves reflecting about their belief, and asking questions. 'Why is this happening to me? Where am I going? Am I going somewhere else? What does God want of me?' When Rehanah meets a person of belief, there can be a very powerful connection through the love they share for the same Creator, even though their belief may be expressed in different ways. She mentioned some quotations from the Koran, and sayings from the Prophet which can help Muslim patients, such as 'I (Allah) am closer to you than your jugular vein' such that they can know that God's love is there even if they feel distant from God; 'If you reach out to me a hand-span, I reach out to you an arms-length'; and 'When you come to Me walking, I come to you running'. Finally, Rehanah recognised the importance of people volunteering their time in hospital, and asked the ladies present if any would consider applying to become a volunteer.



After the meeting, around 10 ladies put their names forward which was a lovely practical outcome from what was a deep and meaningful meeting.

As usual, we had lots of contributions from the floor, inspired by the content of our 3 speakers. We passed the microphone around for at least 45 minutes, and many of us shared deeply about our personal situations and past experiences, and the empathy for one another allowed the meeting itself to be an opportunity for healing as we shared our hearts together. We also passed a donations box round the room, and collected £250 towards Margaret's 'Dignity' project which helps people suffering from dementia.

Candle-lit Muslim prayers, Hindu, Sikh and Christian devotional singing, and readings from our sacred scriptures lifted our hearts as one to a level of deep mutual compassion. We concluded with some announcements, and then spent the rest of the evening enjoying refreshments and one another's company."

Reported by Patricia Earle  
WFWP Birmingham/UK