

The journeys of Duncan Wood

My father Duncan Wood was born in 1910 and grew up in a Quaker household, where he absorbed the basic principles that underpin the lives of members of this small Religious Society. Their Peace Testimony, first pronounced in 1661, urges Quakers to refrain from fighting with outward weapons and to avoid all involvement in war. In later centuries, Quakers felt led to take part in trying to relieve the suffering and heal the wounds of war victims. When the second World War broke out, it was not an automatic decision for Quakers to register as conscientious objectors – Duncan's own brother did so, but later enlisted and served as an RAF pilot. This dilemma affected many Quakers, and indeed many non-Quakers, and Duncan's father expressed it well – "Remember that whatever you decide to do, you can't be happy."

So there was a spiritual and moral journey to be undertaken. For my father, it resulted in his joining the Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU for short). The preparation for service overseas took place in 1941, and included training by Ford mechanics and lessons in the Chinese language. Duncan spent the years 1942 to 1945 in China, as the leader of his group, which was multinational and not exclusively Quaker. Their role turned out to be very different from what they had expected. The events in China included confrontation between the Chinese and the Japanese, inter-tribal fighting and the power struggle between Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Tse-tung. Although the China Convoy did perform some hands-on medical work, their main task turned out to be running a trucking service delivering medical supplies to hospitals. Driving up and down the Burma Road in a convoy of charcoal-fuelled lorries was challenging, as was the culture shock of living in 1940s rural China, where diseases such as typhus were rife.

When Duncan returned to England, having proposed by letter from China, he got married and returned to school-teaching, where his Quakerism and wartime service both informed his approach to the teaching of history. At least one pupil has ascribed his career in European organisations directly to the influence of Duncan's teaching, encouraging an international outlook and understanding.

In 1951, he and my mother Katharine were approached to take up (jointly) a post as Quaker representatives to the United Nations in Geneva. There had been a Quaker presence in that most international of cities since the 1920s, when the world's aspiration for a peaceful future was embodied in the League of Nations. This Quaker commitment to the promotion of peace and justice continues to this day, with consultative status at the United Nations. Many activities started by my parents during their 25 years' service are still undertaken now, albeit updated and adapted. My parents thought long and hard about this journey, a process we Quakers would call discernment. They accepted the challenge, encouraged by another wise comment by my grandfather – "If it is right now, it will be right in the end."

So here we are in Geneva, my parents and 3-year-old me. My parents were to remain there until they retired 25 years later. The work at the Geneva Quaker Centre relied on "quiet processes and small circles, in which vital and transforming events take place." (Rufus Jones) This meant bringing together diplomats and experts over a meal, encouraging discussion and establishing cordial relations between people who were not officially allowed to meet, on account of the mutual

hostility of their governments. This approach required the patient nurturing of a trusting relationship with national representatives, and the assurance that everything taking place at the Quaker Centre was unofficial, informal and private. Seeds of understanding were sown at these meetings which may or may not have borne fruit, and whose gestation could be measured in years or even decades. This is one example of the faith needed to carry out such work, knowing that you may never see the results in your lifetime.

There are United Nations agencies in Geneva that deal with a wide range of humanitarian issues and Quakers have made their concerns known on such matters as the rights of women and children, care for refugees, the treatment of prisoners and, of course, they also make their presence known when disarmament is being debated. A Quaker concern to outlaw the training and deployment of child soldiers began in the 1950s and has taken until now to be accepted and formulated. Another equally long-term process has been the pursuit of the rights of Conscientious Objectors. As a result of the trust built up over years of service by successive Quaker representatives, Quakers have been able to work unseen as mediators between warring parties. More recently, their role as trusted intermediary has been brought into play during negotiations over the rights of developing countries to obtain generic drugs (such as those for HIV treatment) rather than having to pay the high prices charged for the branded versions.

Early in their time in Geneva, my parents started a Summer School, a two-week course for young people, designed to introduce them to the work of the United Nations agencies in Geneva and enable them to meet experts. Geneva rarely sees the sort of dramatic political debate which is common in New York, although the disarmament discussions can attract a heavy-weight political presence. The United Nations in Geneva concentrates on economic and social issues, and, despite its cumbersome structures, does achieve international agreements. It is good to know that the Summer School is still happening every year, giving around 20 young people insights into how the United Nations actually works. When my father died in 2006, a number of those who wrote to me told me that this experience had been a turning point for them and had changed the direction of their life. So my father's journey has itself been a signpost on the journeys of others.

Rachel Malloch

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