

TOOLS FOR CHANGE – CAUX 2007

QUIET TIMES/GUIDANCE SYSTEMS.....A conversation/interview August 7, 2007

Jean Brown and Pari Sanyu

Pari: Good morning. The plan is to look at guidance systems – more specifically Quiet Times. Jean, could you get us started.

Jean: Sure. Is everyone awake – I mean wide awake? Is everyone fully present?

Every guidance system ever tried depends on 1. Asking the right questions and 2. Being fully alert to see and hear the answers.

My father had a collection of ancient Chinese oracle bones, thousands of years old, fragments of bone on which the rulers of the day had instructed the priests to carve their questions. Then the bones were put in a fire and according to the way they fractured in the heat, the answer would be revealed. So here is a third necessity for finding guidance, between asking the right questions and being alert to the answers, there may be a need to go through fire, or struggle. The struggle may be about simply waiting in patience, (how hard we find that) or it may be the fire of dealing with our ego or our fears or anger which maybe blocking our ability to see or hear the answer. This can be painful, let me warn you.

Then, roughly 1000 years after the oracle bone practice, the Prophet Elijah had an encounter with God which is treasured by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. He had been led to a mountain to escape from some antagonists. Suddenly, there was a huge and terrible wind which shook the mountain – but, say the scriptures, God was not in the wind. Then there was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. Then followed a fire, but God was not in the fire. And after the fire there came a still, small voice. God is in that voice, experienced by saints, sages and sinners throughout the centuries. Another translation from the Hebrew calls it ‘the sound of a fine silence’.

You may not believe in God, but you probably believe in Love. The fact that you are here shows a profound belief in the possibility of goodness and moral integrity as tools for a better world, as guides for the best way to live. So how to listen to that voice of Love, how to be guided by that deep inner Truth – that is the question.

In Sanskrit philosophy the word ‘Buddhi’ is used, it means the Higher mind – the discriminating intellect. Mahatma Gandhi was at home with, and in fact depended on, what he called, the Inner Voice. Muslims refer to Il Ham.

Pari: So this is something to be practiced by all from all religions?

Jean: Absolutely and by atheists and agnostics too.

At the heart of our care for the world we all have the need for stillness, for silence and for deep listening because human wisdom alone has really messed up. We know a lot, but real wisdom eludes us. The search is on for inspiration.

At the heart of our care for the world, if we really are serious about bringing peace, reconciliation and transformation, we need to become friends with the practice of stillness, silence and deep listening.

Most of us live reactively. We are constantly reacting to people and situations around us without stopping to think deeply. We need to learn to live reflectively. But many of us find silence uncomfortable. Perhaps we don't want to be alone with ourselves because it is in silence that we have to face the truth about ourselves. But is also in silence that we can make space for this Inner Voice that speaks in everyone's heart; when, even for a few minutes, we push back the clamor of our world and enter another space.

Many of us again find it hard to be still for long. We have to train ourselves to bring our bodies and hearts and minds to a still, listening centre.

So this is the practice which is at the heart of Initiatives of Change. What we often simply call 'The Quiet Time.'

Pari: I was introduced to this practice as a teenager. . In those years, it meant getting up early in the morning, reading from the scriptures and praying. There was much turmoil in my family and those times of Quiet helped me to connect with God in a way that allowed me to face my day to day challenges. Through the years this practice has deepened. It meant for instance that I had to be honest with my husband about some things in my past prior to our marriage. It has become a real tool for me to discern my motives, learn to be honest with others and allow me to embrace the world in a wider way.

I have heard that the Quiet Time can be understood as having three parts – the first a time of connection, then a time of correction and finally a time of direction. Can you expand on each of these for us please? Let's start with connection.

Jean: In connection we recognize and nurture the Divine presence within us. Whatever religious tradition we come from there is the common acknowledgement of God or the Source of Love and Truth at the center of our being. This is a time of relationship or friendship building with that. We settle ourselves in a comfortable place, some people sit up in bed, some like to get up and sit in a chair or cross legged on the floor or go out into nature. Wherever, the important thing is to find a place of minimum disturbance and maximum focus.

Sometimes people will read from their scriptures to help them connect to God. Some people will pray or meditate. All are important. But most important is that we open ourselves up to our Creator, God, bringing our minds and hearts and bodies into an intentional space for that relationship alone. Some times in my urgency to get an answer on some issue, or some direction for my life I don't give enough time just to this central relationship, just enjoying being in that presence. But then, let's be clear, some people make the mistake of only being interested in connection. They meditate, they pray, they enjoy the centredness; and maybe they feel good and they stop with that. The Quiet Time is a dynamic space. It is certainly a time of relaxation and refreshment, as Frank Buchman described it, but it is also a time of tuning into our main work.

Pari: But can't the inner voice speak to us whatever we are doing wherever we are. Most of us don't have time to set aside half an hour just to sit and listen.

Jean: It depends on your priorities. Think of the person you love and respect most. Of course you can communicate in passing, shout messages through the window or SMS them from work. But you are aware you are missing something. You and they want quality time together. And of course you can find the time if it is really important to you. How often do you not have time to clean your teeth, or not have breakfast – you always find time for them don't you?

The Dutch theologian, Henri Nouwen wrote in one of his books: “We cannot change the world by a new plan, project or idea. We cannot even change other people by our convictions, stories, advice or proposals; but we can offer a space where people are encouraged to disarm themselves, to lay aside their occupations and preoccupations and to listen with attention and care to the voices speaking in their own centre”.

Pari: Ok. So we need to create the space, wherever that may be and for whatever length of time. And I guess that is what we are doing here at Caux, during Tools for Change. But now, from this quote, he mentions ‘voices’ plural! You mean there are lots of voices? How on earth do we know which one to listen to? Which is the Inner Voice?

Jean: We need to identify the various voices we are used to listening to so that we can better discern the Inner Voice. The Buddhists refer to the mind as a tree full of monkeys. Chattering away, so the first task is to know the monkeys, name and tame the monkeys! These monkeys represent the voices in me such as the one which keeps complaining that life is not fair, or reminds me that I am fat and ugly. Another voice is worried about the dinner party I am planning and keeps chattering about the details that I might forget. There is the voice of outrage that I might be still feeling from the incident of the day before – first someone else got the credit for an idea that was really mine, then my husband forgot to pass on the message about an important meeting so I was late and looked bad and so on. That sort of thing. Grievances accumulate and are deafening. An offended ego makes the most noise, it's unbelievable. When my pride is hurt, my ego threatened I really cannot hear anything else at all. Even music! There are voices of temptation, of greed, of anger and pain. But also of caring, of important things to do, of calls to make and articles to write.... The monkeys can be distractions from our core business of inner listening to that deeper wisdom. Some need to be put firmly in their place, disempowered, told that will not be listened to and they should return to the jungle where they belong.; some need to be addressed, some need to be reassured that they will not be forgotten, Writing down really helps in this. They need to be addressed one by one.

However, sometimes, the message is in the distraction itself, in the monkey, and the Inner Voice is teaching us something through it. So know your monkeys. While we may all have different ones, they have a lot in common!

The more we recognize and can take charge of the monkey voices, the easier it is to discern the Inner Voice. The Inner Voice is always gentle, persistent and inviting. It cannot speak contrary to its own nature which is always absolutely loving, honest, pure and selfless.

Sometimes as we wait for the booming voice from on high, we stumble over the whisper at our feet. The still small voice, the whisper, the prompting. And of course we can hear it at any time, even when we are not intentionally listening for it. But there is more chance that we will hear it if we are listening and attempting to live in tune.

Pari: So now what about correction? This is the uncomfortable part.

Jean: The second part of the Quiet Time is a time for correction.

The most fundamental tool for positive change is a well nourished and empowered conscience. Does your conscience enjoy free speech? Divine inspiration speaks through our consciences to recall us to right and wrong. The voice of conscience, sometimes so soft is easy to stifle and yet so clear its not easy to mistake.

When I was 21 I was invited to work with Initiatives of Change – then MRA – in India. The Indian leader of the expedition said to me “Come to India with clean hands, a clean heart and come and teach people to listen to the inner voice”. Well, that was like a bucket of icy cold water being thrown all over me. The loudest monkey voice for me at that time was how heroic I was, how I would be going to India to teach people to love each other, my very inflated image of myself was extra loud in order not to hear some deeper truths. When I heard that I needed clean hands etc: my conscience which I had put under house arrest for some time, suddenly broke loose and confronted me! I dreamed of teaching peace but was at war with my own father. I was very bitter against him. I talked loud against corruption, but I had been stealing money from my mother’s purse. My life was a tangle of lies and pretence. And in fact I was not in the habit of listening to the Inner Voice. So I took a deep breath and asked God – I believed in God- to show me how to change. And I was shown some clear steps to correction. One was to apologize to my father for my bitterness, another was to tell my mother about the money.

With great struggle I followed these thoughts and became a much more authentic person, a much freer personality. It started a new relationship with my father which became a most precious friendship.

Most of us have a starting point of fairly radical correction needed in our lives, but then as we go along there is a sort of daily correction needed where some attitude or motive needs to be sorted out, or a hurt or injustice dealt with. The important thing is to be open to corrective regularly so that there is no build up which blocks the source of inspiration.

Let’s remind ourselves what all this is for. It is all about being the sort of people who are free enough to care, those who are open to inspiration for change in the world, those who can really be instruments for bringing reconciliation and transformation and justice.....

Pari: I can sense you can get pretty carried away when you talk about all this....

Jean: Yes, I’m sorry. Tell me more how it has been for you. On the correction aspect for instance.....

Pari: I have suffered from depression for a good part of my life. Yet time and again, it is when I have followed a clear thought that comes to me from my times of listening in quiet and stillness, that healing has come. After one particularly bad episode, I realized that I had unrealistic expectations of how my husband should care for me in my illness, and that I blamed him for taking me away from the care of a physician who had helped me in the past. I realized that I was my own primary care-giver, and that no matter how much I expected my husband to care for me, in the end, I had to take responsibility for my own healing. In practical terms, this meant a struggle of deciding to stop playing the victim and actively seek out this physician who now has played an important part in my healing.

One aspect of correction for me has been to actually become consistent with the practice of stillness and return again and again to this practice. It has opened me up to the reality of healing and hope in so many other situations around me, even in the world.

But now we come to the core of it, the purpose of it all; the receiving of direction. We all want to know what to do, what to be, where to go, how to change the world. We want a plan...what you started off with, that the world needs inspiration. We have brilliant technical, scientific, philosophical analyses and solutions, the money is there, the know how – to solve the world's problems, but there is a mismatch. Many have said that political will is what is missing, Al Gore says that the environmental disaster facing the planet is a moral issue. Where is the inspiration?

Jean: Interesting that you mentioned political will. Because the first question we are all confronted by is do we have the will? The question for each of us is, do we really 'want' the inspiration, the direction for our lives. The 'wanting' challenges the deepest recess of our self will. My desire for autonomy, for my way, is stronger than my desire to be led by God or by a higher power. My love of my own comfort and fulfillment means more to me than the fact that people are starving, or suffering. Something profoundly radical needs to happen in my heart to bring alive the love that ultimately is the tool for transformation. Sometimes that radical happening is prompted by an overwhelming sense of need. For you the need of healing, for me the need to be authentic. This is the experience of the great saints or those we look at as truly inspired individuals. At some point they handed over the control of their lives to a greater cause than self interest; to a higher power, to God, to pursuit of Truth. They were gripped by the invitation of unconditional love no matter what the personal cost. Most of us are uncomfortably aware of the cost of that and spend our lives resisting the invitation. Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu wrote that "God demands nothing less than complete self surrender as the price of the only freedom that is worth having."

A Christian saint called Theresa described it rather well when she prayed, "Oh God I don't love you. I don't even want to love you. Help me to want to want to love you."

In spite of being so far from that complete surrender, amazingly, we can all still pick up whispers of direction.

Pari: Is there a way of being sure that those whispers really are from the Inner Voice? Couldn't we be fooling ourselves? There have been plenty of people in history who have done terrible things in the name of an inner voice, God speaking to them

Jean: Yes, the potential to deceive ourselves is enormous. There are certain safeguards however. Those four absolute moral standards which IofC talks about, they are just four virtues from among the whole family of virtues, but they act as a summary of what we all know intuitively, and all religions teach, to be guidelines for living, for best practice.

Truth cannot speak contrary to its own nature, the Inner Voice is characterized by its honesty, its purity, its selflessness and love. And often by its unpredictability.

The better we know ourselves and understand the layers of hypocrisy and greed and ego from which we operate, the more we recognize our own tendency to distort, to lie to serve our own ends and so on; the more likely we are to be able to tell the difference between those thought processes and ones that come from the Inner Voice, this Source of inspiration.

And then there is the safeguard of teamwork. When you work with a team, with friends who know you well, with whom you share in a spirit of absolute honesty, they can sometimes spot deceptions which you are blind to. Dictators surround themselves with flatterers, with those with as much vested interest in maintaining power as the dictator himself. They cannot speak truth without risking their positions. So create a team to work with. The team maybe even be your spouse!

And then there is the step in faith. Faith is not knowing, it is irrational by its very nature. But when we step out in obedience, having run the tests, having been through the fire, something honours that boldness, swings in behind us. Even mistakes can be redeemed, forgiveness and grace are always available.

Pari: Can you give me an example of when you had a thought which really led to something bigger than you expected? Maybe you have them all the time?!!

Jean: No way! Most of the time we don't see the results of our obedience, our following. Sometimes we can see our part in a chain of inspired events which is tremendously humbling, but one cannot demand this. One time when I was in Calcutta, in India, and I was a much younger woman, I was meeting regularly to explore this practice of Inner Listening with a medical student. One morning I had the thought unexpectedly that she should come with me to a particular conference of Initiatives of Change (MRA) near Bombay, on the other side of the country. When I met her for our daily sharing I mentioned this as a faint hope and of course she said it was impossible. Exams were coming up and there had been strikes so she was behind in her studies.

The next morning in my Quiet Time I had exactly the same thought. I was confused because there was a touch of ambition in me to turn up at that conference with a new person. Anyway I again shared it with her and she again sighed and told me that she couldn't come.

Six mornings in a row I had the same gentle, persistent, clear thought – Nyanam, that was her name, should go to this conference. On the sixth day, rather irritated she told me that to shut me up she would talk to her Principal, her lecturers and her fellow students and since they would all tell her that it was a ridiculous idea I should be satisfied. When I met her that evening she had a shocked look and told me that they all were encouraging her to go. We rushed to the station. There were two seats left on the only possible train. Normally in India in those days – and even these days – one had to book weeks ahead..... Unknown to me, at that conference, there was a politician from a part of India that was locked into a very troubled and potentially violent conflict, and he was the one who would give the order for the guns to start. It was predicted that there would be wide scale bloodshed if his demands were not met.

He sat impassively through the meetings, the organizers understandably knew the urgency of giving him something new, for a change of heart and outlook. The day before he was to leave and it looked as if all had failed to move him, the medical student responded to an invitation to share from the platform. She came up and started to talk about a difficult relationship with her father. But then she started to cry and had to sit down without finishing. There was a sympathetic silence. Then the politician got up and came forward and we all held our breath. He started by saying, "I have heard many things since I have been here, but that young woman has touched my heart. I can understand what she is saying..." and then he started to pour out all he felt, all his life's work, his ambitions and frustrations, his jealousies and his anguish for his people. He really changed and got together with a political colleague to work out a solution without bloodshed.

There is much more to this story and this was only one moment in the chain of events, but from that moment the threat of violence was removed and when political settlement came to that situation, the editorials all over India were questioning how their predictions of violence had gone so wrong.

I sometimes wonder whether there was a back up plan if I had failed to deliver the message or she had failed to respond. Does history for good or ill hang on such slender threads? I don't know. But the thousands of choices we all make, our responsiveness to those inner whispers, all carry far more significance than we can ever know. Many people in this house will have stories to tell, let's make sure we ask each other.

Pari: It is both awesome and a bit scary to know that we have this sort of responsibility. But most of us most of the time are looking for direction in pretty mundane day to day relationships, work decisions. After connection and correction, can we expect to find direction even in the seemingly small details of life. I certainly do have that expectation, for instance....

I work in a centre teaching a child and parent education program with one assistant to help me. A while back, management changed at Head Office, and I was finding my way forward with my new boss. There was a work practice which I sensed he was not keen on, but which I continued because it was the way "we had always done things". This was – when there was no assistant, the teacher would get the assistant's wage for the extra work involved. So I continued to credit myself the assistant's wage on Fridays, when I did not have an assistant. Since he did not comment on this I justified it to myself, and also managed to feel quite hard done by with all the extra work. However, I became uneasy as I continued this practice and felt a tension building up. I realized it was not the right way to handle the situation with integrity. So I followed my thought to call up my boss and have a frank conversation with him. There was some fear and delay involved between actually having the initial thought and actually following it through, as I was unsure of his opinion of me. Finally we were able to have an open talk. He said he had been aware of what I was doing but "did not want to ruffle my feathers". Our talk was a positive step in building a good work relationship and pre-empting a conflict situation. We found a positive way to solve the problem.

Jean: That's great, so practical. This is the adventure we are called to. The how of bringing change, the how to care, the who and where..... all need wisdom, a waiting for the right timing, the courage to act.

Probably the fiercest monkey in our personal zoo is the voice of fear. Fear stops us, limits us at every step. I am talking about unhealthy fear of course. Every emotion has its plus side and its minus.

I know the fear of confessing to my son for instance when I had read a personal letter of his which he had asked me to post for him. I managed to get it open and re-stuck so that it would not show it had been opened. I felt terrible and knew that I needed to be honest and apologise. After all I am his mother and I had a great longing that he would grow up to be a man of integrity.

So I did tell him and say how sorry I was. He looked at me for a long moment and then simply said – "OK, but did you remember to post it?" What was my fear? Loss of face, would I lose my authority as a mother, would I lose my control. How embarrassing to be seen as I really am – nosey, untrusting, a control freak, devious... the fear of looking stupid, the fear of loss, we need to name and know our fears so that we can gently or surgically disempower them.

Doing what is right can potentially lead us into real danger. We have friends in the Solomon Islands at this moment who have felt led to confront a very corrupt government there. They are trying to be wise and listening for guidance at every step, but of course their lives are threatened.

The listening life does not guarantee safety, wealth or success. But there is a greater chance that we will be in the right place at the right time doing the right thing and making our best contribution.

Pari: On a rather different point, why is it important to write down the thoughts from the Quiet Time? Most people around here carry little note books and pens.

Jean: Why do you do it?

Pari:.....not to forget them..... to reassure them that they are being taken seriously...to create space for the next thought.....to see more clearly if there is any pattern emerging..... to be able to discern more easily what might be inspired and what is just my desire or ambition or whatever..... to be able to check back and see whether I have done all I should do.....if it is an uncomfortable thought, like an apology to make or a lie to confess etc: then if I don't write it down I can fool myself that I never thought it!

Jean: I was working with a group of young people who came up with 33 good reasons for having a Quiet Time.

Number 9 reads, "A Quiet Time is protection against 'group think'/ the herd compulsion. How easy in a big crowd to get carried away with the mood of the group or the charismatic speaker. So to stop for a moment in silence can restore you to your own thinking and wisdom and individual responsibility.

Number 12 is the recognition that there is a Grace Gap that human expertise and brilliance cannot fill.

Number 16 says that the Quiet Time is - to give your tongue a rest and your ears a treat!

It is a good exercise to try yourself and see how many reasons you can come up with for having a Quiet Time. Of course it has therapeutic value and is used by many health professionals and counselors, journaling is widely practiced.

Our journey into the silence of our hearts is for all these reasons, but above all, as societies everywhere are starved of meaning, of direction and inspiration, each one of us can be the recipient of Divine guidance for every aspect of our life and world.

I have talked enough. Let's share a few moments of listening in silence together now, it is a wonderful community bonding exercise as well as something to practice individually. Let's go into it with open hearts and minds, it's a chance to reflect on all we have seen and heard. And we can be fully alert to whatever the Inner Voice wants to show us. Before we do so, let's ask our friend Obas from Nigeria to sing a song and we will go straight into the silence from the song. So no applause – just silence. Thank you.