

Leeds - a workshop for peace?

(October 2012)

We all want peace... but what does that mean? Security for me and mine? An absence of conflict? Or something more positive... A shared future we create together through respect, justice and reconciliation? Together for Peace (t4p.org.uk) is a small charity with a big network. Based in Leeds, we bring together diverse people, to generate cooperative projects that tackle local or global issues.

T4P is ten years old in 2012 and is very different from how it started, having emerged through the journey we have taken with it.

To begin at the beginning, in 2002 Leeds played host to a Christian national congress called 'Jesus in the City', in which delegates were invited to explore sites of 'success and separation' in the city; one such was the Royal Armouries Museum. One of the event organisers, Hilary Wilmer, tried to persuade Rev. David Hawkins, Vicar of St George's Church and an Anglican pacifist, to meet Guy Wilson, the Master of the Royal Armouries. Guy was keen to develop links into the city, including with the churches; David on principle had not paid a visit to the Armouries and was reluctant; but when they met they discovered a mutual love of the arts, David being a visual artist, and Guy a poet and lyricist. The Royal Armouries had commissioned Karl Jenkins to compose music to Guy's libretto for the Millennium, and 'The Armed Man, a Mass for Peace' has proved immensely popular, often being at Classic FM's no 1 spot in the following years. The piece had been performed at the Royal Albert Hall but never in Leeds. David and Guy planned to hold a gala performance in the autumn of 2003 and to use it as the centre-piece of a small festival including a poetry completion and other events.

St George's, as a city centre church, was well connected in the city, not least through its work with the homeless through St George's Crypt, and David and Guy enlisted several organisations to get involved including: Oxfam, Leeds Church Institute, Leeds Metropolitan University's Praxis Centre, several businesses, Leeds Faiths Forum, and Leeds City Council's Peace and Emergency Planning department. The timing was important – this was soon after 9/11; the 'war on terror' rhetoric was heating up; there had been unprecedented street protests at the plans to invade Iraq; and Islamophobia was on the rise. Additionally Leeds had recently seen the first influx of refugees and people seeking asylum under the Government's new dispersal policies. The formative idea that Leeds could be a 'workshop for peace' came from Michael McGowan, a former MEP and veteran councillor who chaired the Council's Peacelink meetings, who was also a journalist, and a supporter of T4P from the outset.

The Festival, to be called 'Together for Peace', was to take place in November 2003. Mike Love was asked to take on chairing the Festival reference group and very shortly afterwards its two key players, Guy and David, unexpectedly moved on – David to become Bishop of Barking, and Guy taking retirement from the Armouries. More than 20 organisations wanted to take part and many of them worked collaboratively to organise their own events under

the T4P banner. Funding for a part-time co-ordinator came from the Shaftesbury Society, but most of the work was done by volunteers or by organisations giving personnel and time for free. In the preparation stages people remarked how unusual some of the collaborations were – businesses with campaigning organisations, faith groups with progressive political groups, and so on. And people started to say 'we can't do this only once...' The festival took place with daily coverage by the Yorkshire Evening Post, thanks to the veteran left-wing journalist, Peter Lazenby. Following evaluation it was agreed that T4P could be a biennial event; it was just too much work for the organisations involved to do it annually.

The following year, we did what we could to continue to get the name of T4P recognised, and there was an exhibition of the first festival's events at the Royal Armouries. Then in late 2004 work started on preparing for the 2005 festival. Ed Carlisle, studying part-time at Bradford University for an MA in Peace Studies and who had volunteered with T4P to run refugee events in 2003, joined Mike to form a T4P core team. T4P was now victim of its own success with over 60 organisations taking part in the 2005 festival, with a programme that lasted for three weeks and included over seventy events.

In the aftermath of the 2005 festival we reflected that Leeds was proving fertile soil for T4P's approach but that now it needed to be grounded in those communities in the city that were experiencing conflict. Ed's studies at Bradford led him to Jean Paul Lederach's 'The Moral Imagination' in which Lederach reflects on his work as conflict transformation practitioner and academic and we found, and continue to find, this to be a rich referent for T4P's work to date. Lederach says that the places where he has seen transformative change out of cycles of violence have some shared characteristics. He devotes a chapter to spiders' skill in weaving webs, a metaphor for the skilful, intentional weaving of webs of interpersonal, human to human (rather than official or representational) relationships across a community. Developing such relational webs can repair and restore communities and provide resilience against future conflict.

We realised that through the many partnerships we had fostered in order to develop the festivals we had, unwittingly, been 'web weaving' across the city. We now set out to do this more intentionally. One of the ways we did this was by inviting people we'd met and collaborated with to meet each other over dinner in our homes. These were fairly random groups of people such as officers of the City Council, community and faith activists, artists, poets, politicians, and business people; on one occasion we were surprised to see the hard line Zionist Federation vice-chair getting on famously with a housing co-op resident who worked as a clown.

Lederach learned that the 'critical mass' change he always looked for only came about through the activation of people he calls 'critical yeast': people, rooted in the reality and pessimism of their own community's experience, whose imaginations have begun to be transformed to enable them to grasp a different possible future, often through the agency of creative arts. Critical yeast people have the connectedness and potential to create chain reactions in others and in the community as a whole, and not necessarily because they hold a recognised position of authority. We realised we had identified and were working with a

lot of critical yeast people. Lederach's insight wholly endorsed T4P's approach of working with creative media and people, and it also permissioned us to go beyond, and sometimes circumvent, the recognised community or organisational representatives who sometimes have vested interest in hold things in stasis.

A further insight from 'The Moral Imagination' was the importance of creating flexible movable platforms for people to connect, transact, and produce. This called us to working adaptively with a very light organisational structure and keeping T4P intentionally small. We were coming to see that rather than being an *actor* in the city, T4P had *agency*: in relational web weaving, and in identifying, calling out, and supporting critical yeast people. This meant that we would always work in partnership and never alone on our own sole initiative. As we hosted such platforms – meals, events, festivals, connecting spaces – we were not setting out to achieve our own pre-set agenda, but to create spaces 'where something might happen'. Subsequently we have learned to recognise that we are working with emergence. We have discovered over the years that this approach has borne a lot of fruit in the form of programmes, initiatives, processes and people making connections.

An important influence was Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' book, 'The Dignity of Difference – How to avoid the clash of civilisations', which came out in 2002. In a globalised world, where we are brought into ever closer interdependence and proximity to 'the other', and in societies experiencing super diversity, 'society is a conversation scored for many voices', (as in musical score). This phrase evokes a sense of the creative possibility and dynamic harmony, rather than one of fear and challenge. A few years later renowned sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, in a lecture on Leeds, said the issue for our future was learning 'the art of living with difference'. How could T4P create the kind of spaces where this kind of society-forming conversation could happen, where the 'art of conversation' could be learned?

In 2006 we met film maker, Dave Tomalin at the launch of his film 'Over to the East' in a pub in East End Park. Pursuing our desire to see how we might develop T4P's work in and with communities we had gone to talk to Ann Sherriff at re'new, a regeneration agency working on the east side of the city, to find out where she thought community tensions and conflicts were highest. She had commissioned this film which had uncovered some tensions, and she was trying to work out her approach in response. The film was a 'talking heads' documentary hearing from thirty or so residents, and people from public and voluntary sector agencies, talking about their experience of living and working in the area as it had gone through quite sudden and substantial change. We were immediately drawn to the format of the film which effectively created a virtual room in which many voices could be heard in conversation, and we loved Dave's film-making ethos of giving editorial control to the film's participants in order to counteract the often exploitative nature of film making.

With Dave (www.lippy.info), we have gone on to make four films under the generic title 'In One City', and are presently working on two more. The first and third films hear young adults speaking of how they perceive the geography and demography of the city. The second, 'Ripples Out', is an enquiry into how an expensive regeneration project was

perceived by a wide range of stakeholders, and by residents of the adjacent deprived 'rim' communities. The fourth film, taking Jonathan Sacks' phrase 'society is a conversation scored for many voices' as its theme, features thirteen participants speaking of what it means to them in their lives in Leeds. All these films bring together people whose voices would not normally be heard together on a level platform. They are designed to be discussion starters; to inform and influence people and policies; to be an archive; and to be an empowering and transformative experience for the people and communities filmed. Film provides an expression of Lederach's 'flexible platforms', and is itself the kind of creative media that can open up imaginative possibilities.

In 2006 the extreme right wing British National Party (BNP) were poised to make significant in-roads in the local elections, and we supported a new broad-based coalition to counteract its influence, with house-to-house leafleting in areas they were targeting. After a while though, we began to question the antagonistic approach of the coalition in demonising BNP activists – and especially the refusal to accept that they, and their supporters, should also be drawn into conversation and given a hearing. Could positive action achieve the desired goal of withering away their support at the ballot box? At the beginning of 2007, we therefore invited people to come and explore the idea of a city-centre street festival to celebrate the city's diversity. Thus began the yearly Planet Leeds festival (www.planetleeds.org.uk) on the city's busiest shopping street and other stages. Performances ranging from classical Indian to Kurdish folk, rock to choral, hip hop to gypsy dance, and much more, never fail to draw a uniquely diverse audience who experience and enjoy the cultural mix of the city. By siting the festival in the busiest parts of the city centre, we aim to catch unawares those people who would be unlikely to choose to go and experience music, dance and poetry from other cultures. The T4P festivals featured film, poetry (there is an ongoing, annual T4P poetry competition), theatre, dance, visual arts and we continue to ensure that creative arts remain a vital ingredient in our work.

The last T4P festival in 2007, benefitting from our learning from 2003 and 2005, was probably the best and most effective. However, people often asked 'where is the festival?', or said that there was just too many good events to go to in a short space of time. We started to rethink our biennial large event and – prompted by Anna Dyson, seconded to us for a day a week by the reformed synagogue in Leeds – adopted and adapted the Jewish Limmud model: a day packed with seminars, workshops, creative arts with lots of time to connect with others over coffee. The economic crisis of 2008 seemed to give birth to a plethora of 'summits' for 'top people' – so we came up with the 'Leeds Summat', a space for ordinary people to re-imagine the world in the light of the big issues of time. ('Summat' is Yorkshire dialect for 'something'.) Taking place on a single day in November 2009, more than 800 people came together in the University Union building for a day of workshops, talks, conversations, film, arts, play, food, and music. The Summat provided a space for people to connect, to be inspired, and to be challenged. With no single overarching theme, the space was for diverse people and organisations to come and discuss their priorities and passions in a collaborative and respectful atmosphere. Believing that 'peace' is all-embracing and cuts across all the silos in our thinking and actions, and indeed gives the possibility and purpose for working across silos, we saw the Summat as 'peace' work. More specific 'peace'

related themes were picked up with talks from Jo Berry and Pat Magee, who as an IRA 'soldier' planted the bombs that killed Jo's father, Conservative MP Sir Anthony Berry; seminars with Israeli and Palestinian activists; and a powerful discussion between members of the Leeds Irish and Muslim communities comparing their experiences, at different times, of being 'suspect communities'.

The 2011 Summat built on the success of 2009 and saw over 1300 people attend a similar day event. Drawing on insights of social movement theorists, we see the Summat as a space for brokering, connecting, and strengthening the very diverse and disparate strands of a movement for positive progressive change, and an opportunity for people to be inspired by and become active in campaigns, organisations, and DIY initiatives.

Also here, writers Deleuze and Guattari – who write *very* dense books – gave us the concept of acting as a 'rhizome' organisation. (Or perhaps, recognising our own role within 'rhizome' social movements.) That is, rhizomes are rooted-centred plants such as ginger that are primarily subterranean, but that generate apparently random plants over time. So – drawing on their writing – we see ourselves as primarily about nurturing subterranean networks of relationships, and understanding that events such as the Summat are merely outward expressions of those webs of relationship – rather than the events themselves being ends in themselves. The life is in those relational root systems.

Much of T4P's work involves bringing people together across difference and the 'conversation for many voices' has been a continuing and developing vision. A key source of learning has been the international network of activists, facilitators and practitioners known as 'The Art of Hosting' (AOH). From our first exposure in 2008 to an immersive training in 'The Art of Hosting Conversations that Matter', we have continued to learn and practise Open Space, World Café, Appreciative Inquiry, Circle, and many other practices that seek to draw out collective wisdom and enable the 'many voices' to be heard. AOH practitioners are much more than facilitators as they tread the edge of the future for human collaboration and potential. They hold the balance between working creatively in both the outer and inner worlds, with aikido a common practice amongst them - a peacemaking martial art and discipline which translates effortlessly into working with conflictual situations.

The longest running 'conversation' we have hosted has been between Jewish and Muslim people in Leeds. Ostensibly coming together in late 2010 around the idea of a learning journey to Israel-Palestine, and following several earlier dialogue processes and events on the same theme, the group spoke of their primary concern being the importance of their relationships for the city they live in. The group, which has involved over thirty people, have explored issues such as identity, belonging, culture and humour, rather than strictly 'inter-faith' issues, and have always been encouraged to speak from their own experiences, rather than as representatives of their faith communities. As relationships have deepened, so has trust, enabling them to speak increasingly honestly to one another about themselves and their perceptions of each other. Out of the larger group a smaller number has come together to plan and prepare for a learning journey, as originally envisaged, to take place in early 2013. Meanwhile the larger group has recently resolved to keep meeting, now taking

responsibility for hosting their own process, with our continuing support. Two of the group, one Jewish and one Muslim, have developed 'Inter-Active', an effective programme using sports to develop 'intercultural' and leadership skills in young people from diverse backgrounds.

Further to that, 'interculturalism' is a term that's become increasingly valuable to us. Very simply, against the backdrop of criticism of 'multiculturalism', interculturalism offers positive routes forward. That is, whilst multiculturalism arguably served a valuable role in enabling communities within a diverse society to self-develop with a degree of separation and safety, we perhaps need now – in the post 9/11 world – to develop societies founded upon inter-connection, collaboration and inter-dependence amongst diverse people. This – we believe – is the vision of interculturalism, and it underlies much of the work we do.

Meanwhile, in the Chapeltown area of the city, tensions simmer and occasionally erupt between Asians and African-Caribbeans. Under the auspices of the British Council's Active Citizens programme T4P has worked with others in developing training and practise in active citizenship that involves young adults from both communities, including overseas trips and entrepreneurial initiatives in the community. This has been a classic case of identifying and supporting 'critical yeast' people in both communities.

A helpful and timely insight for our work when we heard Ben Hoffman speak in Belfast in 2006 describing himself and his team as 'peace guerrillas'. Contrasting the way he worked now with his former work with President Jimmy Carter's foundation, he spoke of the efficacy of a small, agile team able to work responsively and adaptively across the whole matrix of society, speaking with Government Ministers or Generals one day, and a village women's collective or jungle guerrillas the next. His approach recognised the vital importance of working systemically and holistically. We keep T4P intentionally small; we work as a flat, non-hierarchical team, intentionally part-time, drawing in skilled freelance associates when needed for specific pieces of work; one of our team is vice-chair of one of the city's official partnership boards; and, crucially, we maintain our independence through not relying on any one particular source for funding or work.

We have also had the privilege of working with, and learning from, the Centre for Good Relations (CfGR) in their practice of civic mediation. CfGR grew out of Mediation Northern Ireland's work in Burnley and nearby towns following the riots in 2001 following which they had been invited by the Government to apply their learning from their work in N. Ireland to the UK mainland. Their approach, also heavily influenced by J.P. Lederach, involves: civic diplomacy – obtaining the 'buy-in' and support of civic leaders; working with existing structures and mechanisms to embed their approach; training and development to build capacity of local people and agencies to deal with future tensions; and projects and case work, following mapping to identify and select which aspects of the conflict are amenable to mediation.

Through some of our work we have come across, and sometimes come under, the powers at work in the city. We have felt intimidated and experienced humiliating failure in situations

we had no power to change. At a time when this was particularly acute, synchronicity brought author Adam Kahane to Leeds to speak about his experiences of working with 'power and love', the title of his just-published book. He had been challenged that most of his work in bringing people together from all sides to resolve conflicts or to find consensus for shared futures was 'love' work, which failed to take account of entrenched power differentials. This led him to an understanding that, for lasting change to come about, we have to work with both power and love as two polarities of a paradox. We cannot do both at the same time - oppressive power has to be resisted and overcome but, using the analogy of walking, after the power step must come the love step; we are never able to walk on one leg only!

The invitation to write down some of our history and learning has been a good opportunity to reflect on the people and situations that have shaped us, and on the privilege of always working at a learning edge. Following a century that was the most destructive in human history, and yet which saw emerge tender shoots of non-violent resistance and revolution, we have to devote ourselves to learning new ways of transforming conflicts, of increasing understanding and finding new ways to live together in peace. Cities are prime sites for this learning – workshops for peace.

Recommended reading

Lederach, Jean Paul (2005) *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Sacks, Jonathan (2002) *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum)

The Art of Hosting (www.artofhosting.org)

Hoffman, Ben (2009) *Peace Guerilla: Unarmed and in Harm's Way, My Obsession with Ending Violence* (Ottawa: Canadian International Institute of Applied Negotiation)

Kahane, Adam (2010) *Power and Love: a Theory and Practice of Social Change* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler)



(Good Relations training 2011, in partnership with the Centre for Good Relations.)



(Active Citizens leadership programme 2012.)