

How way opened

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For the first forty years of my Quaker life I was both hoping that way would open and expecting that such an experience would never be given me. Instead I seemed always to live reactively, doing what turned up, being loyal, seeing things through as best I could, reluctant to make sudden breaks or changes of direction.

I had come to think that my habit of mind was to refuse to listen for a call, lest I should be unable to resist it. I feared being drawn or driven to something against my will, against my better judgment. 'Give over thine own willing' – certainly not!

I have three particular recollections of occasions when I dug in my heels, two of them before I had become a Friend and encountered the concept of way opening. The first was in my mid teens. I emerged from an agnostic upbringing into an independence of mind expressed by getting myself baptised and confirmed in the parish church, singing in the choir, cycling to early communion before school. I was reading a wide range of Christian mystical texts: St John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, Simone Weil, *The cloud of unknowing*, along with the poetry of Donne and Herbert and Hopkins and Lamartine. I started on Theresa of Avila. Then I stopped. I feared that if I continued I might find I had a vocation to be a nun, and that I did not want. I didn't stop going to church but I erected some kind of internal defence.

Looking back, I am surprised that I continued with churchgoing at university, seeking out a chapel when my college had none. My heels continued to dig in, however. I remember a particular sermon about the impossibility of achieving anything in one's own strength, how the only way was to abandon the puny solo attempt and entrust oneself to God's perfect omnipotence. No thank you, I said again. I'll stay in control here.

Twenty years later, married and with two children, I was very active in the anti-nuclear movement as well as in my Quaker meeting. I was close to demonstrating with a boldness that would court arrest at Greenham or at Molesworth. Again the question of trusting God's call came up. I agonised over what the cost of obedience might be. I went to an older woman Friend with the question, how can I sincerely pray for guidance if I might find myself called to put political protest before my responsibility to my children? She assured me that God would not ask that of me, but I couldn't risk finding out, so again I held myself in check.

At the end of 2007 my marriage was over, my children were adults, my parents dead, a relationship shockingly terminated. I was in the habit of travelling a good deal, combining several kinds of work with visits to family, friends and interesting places.

Since its inception in 2001 I had been a member of the Movement for the Abolition of War (MAW). This seemed an obvious sequel to my support of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Campaign Against the Arms Trade and the Bradford School of Peace Studies. I had been thinking for several years that I should get involved by volunteering. This would seem to be a very suitable choice for a new commitment. I had relevant knowledge and experience. I could easily travel to central London using my free travel pass. In my meeting was an example of a Friend making a similar commitment to another organisation who continued well into her eighties. I had not, however, managed to get to a single meeting of MAW, though I did read the newsletter thoroughly. My feelings were of duty rather than enthusiasm. I continued to delay making the initial phone call. This, it seemed, was not where 'my deep joy meets the world's deep need'.ⁱ

The Friendly FolkDancers, with whom I went on tours to Kenya and to mainland Europe in the 1990s, were looking for people to go to Rwanda at a period when my diary was unusually empty, for three weeks in February and March 2008. I applied and was accepted. I borrowed a guide book and did some background reading, supplementing my sketchy knowledge of the genocide and its aftermath. I learnt from FWCC about the small but active Evangelical Friends Church.

I enjoyed the tour; I was entranced by the varied beauties of the landscape; we visited two genocide memorials, all four Friends schools and many churches, where our performances were welcomed as embodied expressions of a desire for peace and reconciliation. We met David and Debby Thomas, the American missionary couple who have been attached for more than a decade to the *Eglise Evangelique des Amis au Rwanda*/Evangelical Friends Church, and Debby took us at dusk on a tour of her garden, where she was developing examples of practices to improve nutrition. I came home and got on with my busy life, quite unaware of what was to develop.

Only a week or two after my return, a Friend in my meeting read as ministry an extract from an account in *PeaceWays* of a participant's transformative experience in a workshop in Rwanda. I had a copy of the same account, collected in Kigali on a visit to Friends Peace House (FPH). *PeaceWays* is the journal of Friends Peace Teams (FPT), an American Quaker project with programmes in Aceh Province in Indonesia, in Colombia and in the African Great Lakes Region, where much of their current work takes the form of Healing and Rebuilding our Communities (HROC) workshops, developed for post-conflict situations and based on the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP), organised in Rwanda through FPH. Soon after, another edition of *PeaceWays* carried an account by Sarah Mandolang, the youngest member of our Friendly FolkDancers group, who left us by bus to join a project in Uganda, also part of the work of the African Great Lakes Initiative (AGLI), who run the HROC workshops and train the workshop leaders.

At the end of April I was in Florida, staying with Lyn, a Friend whom I know through the international group, Quakers Uniting in Publications. At a Friends School in Ohio, Lyn had had a bilingual classmate, Antero, who had now offered to go as Spanish translator for a FPT exploratory visit to consider the feasibility of setting up AVP workshops in Colombia. He needed a meeting for clearness as part of his preparation; I was invited to serve on his clearness committee. I started reading some FPT manuals and was impressed.

A day or two later the three of us drove across the state to a house-warming dance party hosted by Caroline, who had taken part in Friendly Folk Dancers tours in the USA. Another guest at the small party was Cece, who worked for Friends Peace Teams. I showed some photos of the recent trip to Rwanda and Cece noticed that I had learnt quite a lot during our three weeks. At a small worship group the next morning, Cece had been invited to talk briefly about FPT. She brought more copies of *PeaceWays* and I added to my collection.

By now the coincidences were quite compelling. I mentioned to Cece during my drive to the airport to fly home that I was becoming seriously interested in AGLI. Cece told me that Laura, a young American woman Friend who had spent some years in Rwanda on AGLI projects, was living in London; she would email me contact details.

I made no contemporaneous note of these stages. My recollection, however, is that by now I was beginning to talk to a close Friend about the possibility that something significant was happening for me or to me. I had no sense of pressure, no need to be making anything happen, no urge to reserve space in my diary, which is my usual practice when a trip starts to take shape. I did, however, contact Laura and arrange to meet her, probably some time in June.

That meeting was, I suppose, what early Friends called 'an opportunity'. In the unlikely setting of Starbucks in Brunswick Square, away from the distractions of a lively baby, Laura invited me to explore ideas, to focus on what had moved me, to consider how my particular gifts might be serviceable. I knew I was being impelled to consider returning to Rwanda, but I didn't know what I might have to offer. It occurs to me now that our conversation was the verbal equivalent of the party game where a searcher is directed to a hidden object by information in terms of 'warmer, warmer, hotter, colder...' Laura pointed out that my skills as a speaker and writer of English should not be under-rated; I cooled at the suggestion that fundraising for AGLI in Britain might be my most useful contribution.

The constraints were many: my ignorance of Kinyarwanda (and my knowledge that it is high on the list of the world's most difficult languages), my lack of AVP experience, my unwillingness to be away from home for more than a month or two at a time. So was my sense of the rightness of a return visit just a fantasy? What could I offer from my particular skills and interests? For the first time I started to think about combining elements of two pieces of work that had touched me deeply – HROC and Debby Thomas's concern for improving physical, intellectual and spiritual health through better nutrition. Laura encouraged me to seek greater clarity. My summer was spent growing vegetables, dancing, camping, sailing, making provision for the passing of each day in the usual fashion.

In *The Friend* I saw a small announcement of the annual meeting of Friends Africa Interest Group on a Saturday in September and I was clear I should attend. As well as retired members of Friends House staff and other Friends with a lifetime of commitment to Africa, there were members of meetings with links to projects in various countries and people describing individual pieces of work. I spoke of my growing sense that I might be going back to Rwanda and was warmly encouraged. Laura was there for part of the day, and asked at the end of her presentation if somebody could provide accommodation for Dave Zarembka, the American Co-ordinator of AGLI, who was coming on a speaking tour.

Dave stayed with me for a week in early October. He tried to interest me in projects in North Kivu or in Burundi, but by the end of his stay I was sure I wanted to return to Kigali, to people and institutions I already knew. Dave was due to visit Kigali in early December and would be able to discuss my proposal if I had made one by then.

I went on holiday for two weeks, trusting the inner work to continue. Only on my return at the end of October did I begin writing a project proposal and preparing the lengthy documentation required by AGLI. I grumbled to Laura about the amount of information and reflection demanded by the application form, which I saw as primarily for summer work-campers rather than applicants with individual projects. She counselled me to stick with it and she was right – in the course of presenting my history and my skills in considerable detail I saw ways of being useful that I had not previously considered. For example, I can teach songs and chants by ear, from a musical staff or by tonic sol-fa (which is used in East African Friends' hymnals).

Almost at the last moment I realised how much my inspiration had been nourished by knowing that the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture had been running a psychotherapeutic project on the allotments close to my house, where I have cultivated first one plot then two for 30 years. I have known of the Natural Growth Project and been glad to be part of the organisation that hosts it, for several years. Most of the project's clients are Kurdish refugees, who use their plots not only to grow food and flowers but also to cook in the open air and eat together in larger family groups than their scattered housing enables. It has been heart-warming to observe the social as well as the physical benefits of gardening together. Many have moved on from being clients to renting as individual plot-holders. I arranged to meet the

therapist and the garden worker on the MF plot, and they sent me a couple of recent articles to supplement what I had learnt from reading a book about the gardening therapy written by the previous therapist.ⁱⁱ Living as a genocide survivor or a released prisoner in Rwanda is not the same as being a refugee who has been tortured and is now existing in a foreign and not very welcoming country, but there are similarities.

My project, eventually entitled 'Growing together: a reconciliation and development project for Rwanda', focussed on encouraging groups who had taken part in HROC or a similar process to start growing vegetables together, using organic methods and encouraging greater variety in their diets. I am not an expert in horticulture or sustainable development, but I am a trained teacher and an enthusiastic allotment holder. For many years I have taken my surplus produce to my meeting and invited contributions to Quaker projects with an emphasis on nutrition and self-reliance

I had my meeting for clearness with a few Friends from my area meeting. I submitted my project proposal, my AGLI Peace Team Application Form including 10 'short essays', and my CV, in mid November. Almost immediately I received enthusiastic responses from two Rwandan Friends. By Christmas I had been formally accepted for service. At the end of January I set off.

I could have expected that when way opens the path becomes clear, at least for one step at a time. That, after all, is what the metaphor implies. Much of the effort of my internal processes (which might or might not be defined as 'spiritual'), as could be inferred from the examples I gave at the beginning of this article, has been around trying to make my life go the way I want and preventing myself from being carried off in a different direction. I have no way of knowing how that may be for other people, though I do know quite a lot of stubborn Quakers. What has been completely new and unexpected for me over the last year has been the coming together of disparate elements and events, concluding in undramatic certainty. In a different dialect one might speak of bringing one's will into conformity with the will of God, though that sounds rather grandiose for such a gentle process. Following a leading would be another useful term.

I love the paragraph by William Litleboy, quoted as *Quaker faith & practice* 10.26, of which this is part:

One who has been lifted out of the horrible pit, has had his feet set upon a rock and a new song put into his mouth, finds it hard to believe that another who has arrived quietly and without crisis... can really be a disciple at all.

I wish I had known that when I was being challenged by Christian Union friends at school to acknowledge my sin and accept Jesus into my heart to save me.

'Quietly and without crisis' exactly describes how I have experienced perceiving and following this leading. As I write in late March, a month after my return from the first stage of my project, I am planning further visits in October and next February. With the help of my support group I have decided to offer my concern for formal testing by my meeting, as described in *QFP* chapter 13. I do not know what the outcome will be, nor how the project will develop. I am, however, quietly confident that, even if it does not take me where I expect, way will continue to open.

It is now July. My local meeting has recognised that my concern is religiously valid and is placed upon me to further. My meeting has also agreed to make a financial contribution to AGLI each time I return to Rwanda. My area meeting has also minuted its support and asked individual Friends to support me as they can.

I am actively planning visits in October and next winter and expecting to continue for three or four years. I am very conscious of the air miles associated with carrying out my project. A dear friend observed that I won't want to be travelling so far merely to be growing very expensive cabbages, even to meet perceived need. A Rwandan Friend prominent in the Churches Mobilisation for Poverty Reduction programme in Kigali insists that 'our people need skills', but as well as improving my organic practice [on my own allotments] I am also thinking about working with teachers on topics such as nutrition and family health while enhancing their ability to teach in English – the European language now being used in preference to French. Laura is encouraging me to make explicit the links between growing food together and growing together in community – the two meanings implicit in the project title. I rejoice in the challenge to use my whole self in this new work.

In recent weeks my email inbox has contained information on permaculture and worm composting, an article about an urban food growing project in a Nairobi slum (which I might visit while changing planes), a suggestion that I 'drop down' to Burundi to teach improved gardening skills when I am next in Rwanda, and notice of a local showing of a film about Cuba's urban horticultural revolution of the 1990s when supplies of Soviet oil and fertilisers suddenly ceased. This last was hosted by Ealing Transition Initiative – part of a network of UK groups developing local resilience in preparation for energy descent after 'peak oil'. On either side of my October visit I shall be taking part in the Friends House conference and the Woodbrooke seminar on a Zero Growth Economy.

My enthusiastic welcome in February was partly explained by a current Rwandan government initiative to increase food self-sufficiency by bringing exhausted land back into cultivation and encouraging small scale 'kitchen gardening' in both town and country. As I do the intellectual work of learning more about sustainability and development, I am also opening to the possibility that I may find ways to contribute to a small nation's journey from devastation to sufficiency, bypassing the rich world's recent excesses of unsustainable consumption. I am also attempting to move towards my hosts' level of biblical literacy. My heart leapt when I read quotedⁱⁱⁱ a verse from Ecclesiastes: 'It is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in their toil.' Recognising my good fortune in having that pleasure, and wanting to share it, I trust that I shall continue to be rightly led.

Elizabeth Cave

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, a contemporary American theologian, speaks of that place "where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need."

ⁱⁱ *The healing fields* by Sonja Linden and Jenny Grut. Frances Lincoln Ltd 2002 with The Medical Foundation for the Care of the Victims of Torture ISBN 0-7112-2027-1

ⁱⁱⁱ In 'Grace at the table' by Molly Anderson in *EarthLight: spiritual wisdom for an ecological age*, edited by Cindy Spring and Anthony Manousos for Friends Bulletin Corporation and EarthLight Corporation, Oakland, CA, 2007 ISBN 0-9700410-2-0

Elizabeth Cave's blog can be read at <http://growingtogetherinrwanda.blogspot.com>
PeaceWays can be read at aglionline.org/publications