



# QPSW Journal Letter from South Africa

Anand Madhvani, Journal Letter No. 3, June 2003

---

Published by Quaker Peace & Social Witness, Friends House, Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ  
Telephone: 020 7663 1075 Fax: 020 7663 1049 email: martinw@quaker.org.uk

---

Johannesburg, South Africa  
Email: anand@dosima.org

Dear Friends,

The last few months have been very busy, and I am only slowly catching up with all that is happening, processing it all.

On top of the normal work of my host organisation, I've been helping with a soup kitchen for the homeless in central Johannesburg, looking at ways of assisting a women's community development project, hosting several friends and family members from home, travelling around more of the region, and starting a new relationship.

Perhaps most importantly, I've constantly been meeting and talking with vast numbers of people from very different backgrounds (as well as reading a few quite amazing books). Each has left me with a lot to think about, but its been one new experience racing by fast after another. I hope you don't mind me taking this chance to do some thinking out loud – I just rarely get this kind of quiet time to myself to mull things over!

I've been making several trips across to Kuruman, where my co-QPSW worker, Helen, is based. It is always interesting to compare notes while we are together, as we live in such contrasting worlds. Kuruman is a quiet and sleepy old mission station miles from anywhere, whereas Johannesburg is the brash, modern metropolis, constantly seething and re-inventing itself, locus of so many lives and aspirations.

A few weeks ago I was chatting with Helen there, and we were comparing notes about some of the less than wonderful effects of imported Christianity on some sections of the local population. "They got religion bad" was our general conclusion, I think. A strange one to reach, especially while sitting in part of the Moffat Mission, where the bible was originally translated into Setswana.

Mission, and specifically proselytising a religion, is a difficult area for me. That's partly because we generally have no role for it within Hinduism, accepting that all may take different paths, and that these all have value. It is therefore totally alien to my upbringing.

In addition, I've worked around the international development field for some years, where there is increasing awareness of the dangers, and sometimes subtle nature, of cultural and technological imperialism, especially when engaging with 'traditional' or 'undeveloped' societies. (Even any such labelling obviously creates an unhealthy power dynamic, which is not only patronising and disrespectful but typically counter-productive too, when it leads to ignoring invaluable local knowledge and techniques).

It was therefore with some trepidation that I returned to Kuruman a few weeks later with a team of facilitators, to conduct an Alternatives to Violence (AVP) workshop with a group of young people doing training in mission.

The group was lively and incredibly mixed – individuals from Bangladesh, Botswana, Canada, Germany, Holland, Hong Kong, India, Jamaica, Kiribati, Madagascar, South Africa, South Korea, the UK and Western Samoa! Aside from origins, the group also encompassed the son of a tribal chief, a trained judge, an ex-prisoner and my younger brother, who was on a brief visit from London.

One of the first questions with such a diverse group was, inevitably, how we would communicate over the course of the two day workshop. The only practical solution was to work in English, the only common language, given the wealth of languages and lack of possible interpreters. This worked better than might be expected, although two or three people were not able to participate fully as a result.

During the workshop, we did exercises in affirmation, communication, cooperation, trust and community-building, unpacking the notion of violence, broadening the focus beyond physical violence, and looking at elements of non-violent communication. When the issue of disciplining children came up and was role-played, a divide in the group emerged around the issue of physical discipline – smacking and so on. However this divide was just one way in which a deeper gulf between, for want of better words, ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ outlooks kept surfacing.

I can only portray this simplistically, and in a slightly caricatured manner, here. On the ‘traditional’ side, smacking was something that many people had experienced, and was acceptable within certain limits. It was, some also said, ‘part of their culture’, and also supported by the bible (that wonderful Old Testament again!) The ‘modern’ side were aghast, thinking about many experiences to the contrary, trying to examine child and adult psychology, and occasionally also drawing on the bible for alternative guidance.

This is not an easy debate, but what perhaps made it more difficult were very different values and standards of evidence on both sides. Violence was so abhorrent to some, that obviously other ways needed to be explored and found, and culture improved or adapted accordingly. From the other side, some violence was acceptable and indeed part of life, existing tradition and culture had been perfectly adequate for many generations, and any criticism of tradition was very sensitive issue (especially when coming from the generally ‘first-world’ ‘modern’ camp, because of the overtones of an imperialist project).

The workshop ended with us going around the circle of participants, joined by a few of the mission staff, and sharing our thoughts. Richard Aitken, the Quaker director of Moffat, threw in an interesting challenge about how we should react if we somehow found that God held, or promoted, values which we found we could not agree with. This struck me as being similar to what is described at the end of the Hindu epic Mahabharata, when one of five ‘good’ brothers passes onto heaven, and finds that instead of his siblings being there, his enemies have all been rewarded. This leads him to question the values they had all lived by, and conclude that they had lived as best as he could, based on the knowledge they had available to them. As his brothers are not allowed to accompany him, he chooses not to enter heaven (on some versions of the story).

In a sense, these unsettling questions can only be asked from within the framework of the 'modern' outlook, with alternative possible sources of values which can clash with those ordained from on high. The problem that the brother in the Mahabharata wrestles with is, in a sense, what to do when his morality derived from experience clashes with one that is chosen for him – the same clash between 'traditional' and 'modern' that kept appearing in the workshop.

Perhaps part of these differences are alternative pictures of the nature of truth, or maybe the truth about values. On the one side, such truth can be seen as something almost decided by fiat by something *outside* our immediate reality, which is what gives it value. It is revealed to us and therefore otherwise hidden, privileging those who have been enlightened to it by others in the know, and always fragile, in danger of being lost or forgotten again.

Alternatively the truth is *about* reality, and therefore embedded in, and evident from, all things around us, once we learn to discern it. This truth is potentially open to all to discover, and resilient, constantly resurfacing within different cultures and traditions.

For me, the latter is far more plausible, and constantly reinforced by the ways in which vastly different influences in my life have pointed in similar directions. When discussing the issue of disciplining children within the workshop, I was constantly thinking back to a year I spent working at a Montessori pre-school nursery in London, and some of the things I learnt about handling 'difficult' children. Many of these were similar to what we look at in the AVP workshops, or that I've seen in drama work with the homeless, or in international development, working with refugees, looking at issues of restorative justice... many different experiences, helping me to improve my understanding of how to handle myself and other people, what might clumsily be called 'emotional best practice'.

That complex understanding is constantly challenged, fine-tuned, refined by use in practice, seeing what works and what does not. For instance, I've been thinking back on a recent incident, and what it might have to teach me. A week before this workshop, I was attending the soup kitchen in town, which stops at a number of sites in the centre of the city, where we share soup, bread and companionship, and give some basic medical attention. At one of the stops we were directed to an elderly man too weak to talk or move, covered in dirty clothes painfully inadequate against the cold, with his bare head resting against razor wire.

The community at that site had tried calling an ambulance several times over the course of the day, but nothing arrived. We hand-fed him some soup and rehydration solution, which was difficult as he could hardly move his jaw or signal what he wanted, and was coughing a nasty, rattling cough. A trainee doctor called the ambulance, and two of us stayed at the stop, hoping to flag it down if it passed by. Waiting with him, listening to his breathing, feeding him slowly and awkwardly and trying to make him more comfortable, was a strange mixture of feeling deeply worried and yet also strangely peaceful, I guess because of the caring role we had to play.

It was a real relief when (after some frantic running around dark streets, past small open fires and dark openings) we eventually caught the ambulance as it passed and directed it to where he lay. It was then quite a shock when the two ambulance men emerged furious and shouting at us, and everyone in sight, for being called out for such a case. It took (I only later realised) quite a few of the techniques that we look at in our workshops – 'I' messages, reflecting

back, body language – to calm them to a point where we could talk, reassure them that we understood their reaction, that no, he hadn't been like this for days already, this did seem to be a serious case, and we understood how difficult it might prove to get him admitted to a hospital, and were prepared to come along with him if that would help. It was also hugely draining to control my own anger at their initial reaction, with all its racist/elitist overtones, and channel it into reactions that would be calming and productive, rather than escalating the situation, which my initial reactions might well have done.

That man, Morgan, was 71 years old, and would probably have died that night otherwise. He was, we later found out, admitted into hospital (the ambulance drivers drove us a block and then said we didn't need to accompany him, so we rejoined the soup kitchen). The next week, another homeless person died before the soup kitchen staff managed to find him the next morning, while last week there was another similar case which we still haven't managed to track down.

The 'emotional best practice' I am thinking about probably saved his life. It wasn't something that I had planned before, or was consciously thinking about as I reacted, being more instinctive than that. (I suspect also that working pre-school has strengthened my patience muscles!) Perhaps uncommon sense is a better term, because the common sense reaction would have been different, and would probably have resulted in the ambulance driving away empty. Maybe the uncommon sense reactions are what we need to develop further, and all learn until they become common sense, just as we have learnt instincts that say slavery is wrong, and are still learning about better ways of relating across genders, age, cultures, and with people who break cultural norms.

This process of exploring/evolving/constructing and testing better ways of dealing with one another, and ourselves, is I guess at the heart of AVP. It is very much a process of empirical and emotional discovery, as well as sharing and comparing experiences, a process which some find very unfamiliar, puzzling and difficult at first.

One participant in our workshop at Kuruman constantly asked questions (which we encourage), and seemed to grasp quite well a lot of the issues we were exploring together. However they always came back to wanting to know how it all fit together neatly, what the formula was, and later on, why we as facilitators didn't take a strong stand right from the beginning on what we thought was right and wrong. It took a while for us all to realise this was stemming from a very different style they were more used to, and expecting, of simply being handed 'the truth' by those who know it.

As AVP facilitators, however, we are always clear that we don't know all the answers, are also journeying with the group, learning from and with them. (This is shown by how facilitators participate in the final graduation ceremony – from the 'university of life' as one facilitator usually puts it – and get the same certificates as participants). Underlying that for me is also a sense that truths are strong but sometimes complex, can stand questioning and exploring. We may all see different facets of them, so can learn much through such open sharing. It was really nice when the questioning participant started to see differences in the methods more clearly, and really appreciated our approach – like something new had clicked into place.

Yet doesn't this smack of a new imperialism, exporting a new set of values onto people from very different cultures, converting the missionaries to another creed again? Yes, and no, I would respond.

One direction from which people react against such changing of cultures is a sense that all cultures are complete entities which are of equal value – a kind of cultural relativism. Therefore it seems like an unnecessary power trip, and of no value in itself, to effectively force people to discard one culture for another. Certainly there has been much of that in history, through various cultures seeing themselves as superior to others, and therefore justified in their civilising mission. Simply the fact we could vaguely conduct a workshop in English with people from so many countries attests to the power of such past imperialisms.

However I feel that what we are doing is different, perhaps coming from another strand of liberal thought, which treasures diversity as the source of different alternatives for improving our cultures. Also it recognises cultures as more complex than monolithic unchanging entities, living things rather than museum exhibits. Once we become aware of the way they evolve, differences between communities, families and individuals even within a culture become clearer and more important. There may be wife beaters and child molesters and murderers in every country, yet that does not tell us much about whole cultures.

For me, the kind of ideas we spread through AVP are not meant to attack or supplant cultures, but maybe help us see ways of improving them. The process is not giving others a ready-made template for how they should live, but creating a space in which we explore traditions, experiences and alternatives together, and usually move to a deeper shared understanding of them. Seeing that the first people we should change are ourselves, not others, is a key element of this process.

We were exhausted by the end of the workshop, and Helen had a nice surprise for me to read and relax with. We'd been to the Central and Southern Africa Yearly Meeting a month earlier, and were excited to discover that new Ffriends from Botswana had actually *met* Alexander McCall Smith! The day I got to Kuruman, a parcel arrived from Gabarone from Anita and David (thank you, thank you!) containing book four fresh off the presses – 'The Kalahari Typing School for Men', which we had despaired of obtaining in South Africa.

I guess I should explain, for those of you not (yet) in the know. In book one, we meet Mma Ramotswe, a traditionally built 'Motswana' (Tswana speaker, 'Botswana' meaning land of the Tswana speakers, 'Setswana' the language itself) and learn about her dear daddy, the cattle she inherited from him on his demise, and her plan to set up Gabarone's first detective agency. The following books follow the (very gentle) adventures of 'The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency', painting an engaging and fascinating picture of life in Botswana.

The world McCall Smith creates is more than just a good read. It is strangely wholesome and nourishing as well. I was not at all surprised to hear that the author is incredibly nice person, and that he has set out to create a healthy read, drawing on the best elements of the 'old Botswana morality' which Mma Ramotswe often reminisces fondly about, while looking out over her pumpkin patch at sunset in the yard at Zebra Drive, or while chatting with Mr J. L. B. Matekoni while her little white van got attention at Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors.

In some ways the books are quite conservative, and paint an artificially old-fashioned picture of Gabarone – I was surprised when I first saw video footage of the Botswana's capital, as

the books never mention the skyscrapers! However that doesn't seem to matter, as they do not shy away from some of the difficult social issues facing the country either. He just chooses to deal with them in a very thoughtful, gentle way. I keep thinking of Tolkein's project of creating a mythology for England, and this series in some ways feels like a contemporary yet somehow spiritual mythology for modern Botswana.

What does surprise me is that the author does not even live in Botswana, just visiting for a month each year, yet has been able to see so clearly from outside what valuable things lie within the culture, and find such a wonderful way of communicating them. So I settled down to relax with the fourth book, and sure enough, there was a problem about how best to handle a child that had done some bad things, as well as observations about how some of the Christian churches had introduced unhealthy notions about behaviour, punishment and sin.

Well, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised if insights come from unexpected directions!

With best wishes,

Anand



*Orange Farm is a vast sprawling township, nearly an hour away from Johannesburg. Lying further south-west of the original SOuth WEst TOWnship, Soweto, it is more cut off from the centres of economic activity, poorer and newer than its better known neighbour. However it does, in some ways, feel more forward-looking and positive - people there haven't been stuck in the same place for generations, seeing no visible improvements.*

*I'm 'Team Leader' for the process of introducing Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) Workshops there, starting with the Aha Thuto school. The picture shows one stage in the training of our first team of AVP facilitators from the school, both teachers and pupils, who have already started to gain experience in the running of further workshops at the school (with infectious enthusiasm). I am excited to be involved with their personal growth, and have the chance to learn more about their wider community, over the coming months.*