

**LOSS AND IDENTITY CRISIS: MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN SUDANESE WOMEN IN DIALOGUE. New College, Edinburgh University. February 2004.**

From early 1995 through late 1998 I lived in Khartoum. As the wife of the British Ambassador to Sudan I enjoyed a privileged position which contributed to a unique experiment in peace building between northern and southern, urban and displaced, Muslim and Christian women. "Listening to loss" dialogue, based on listening therapy as pioneered by The Samaritans UK, resulted in a spectacular breach in the Christian/Muslim divide. What occurred offers suggestions for Muslim/Christian reconciliation as well as a possible method for personal healing, conflict resolution and community reconciliation in post-civil war Sudan.

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"Women's work" was something I never wanted to do. For years I even avoided women's tea parties. Listening to Sudanese women in peace dialogue would change that. In conversation about their pain and identity issues, the women confronted my own beliefs, fears and vulnerabilities. It began at a tea party.

An Invitation to Tea. "Lillian, can you find us some Christian women to talk to about peace?" The two Muslim women who asked this question didn't know me very well but they had heard I was interested in social issues and decided to check me out. One a medical doctor and the other a professor of French at Khartoum University, they respectable professionals, not tea party addicts. I felt I could not refuse their request even though I thought it odd that Sudanese women needed to involve a foreigner in order to meet other Sudanese women.

First they invited me to tea to discuss the idea. Most of the ten or twelve northern Muslim women were members of a charity known as Al Manar, the Lighthouse, which focused on legal issues and human rights. Not only were they feminists and for the most part professionals, but some of them had even in their slippery past been communists and one or two had from time to time been imprisoned. The doctor was soon to flee to Egypt and the lecturer, whose husband was a political figure in exile, would leave quietly for Canada one night about a year and a half later. But by then they had helped start a process which at the time seemed unstoppable.

I sought Christian interlocutors at the Episcopal cathedral. The Christians, all educated southern Sudanese, responded cautiously. Although most did not have university degrees, there was a medical doctor among them and several leaders of southern women's community associations and self help projects. All spoke English well. They insisted first on coming to tea without any Muslims present to discuss the request. After I told them that I didn't really know what would develop from the proposed encounter but could see no harm in it, they asked me to stand with them, hold hands and say "The Grace". They seemed nervous but willing.

Naively, I couldn't see what all the fuss was about, what the anticipated dangers might be, and didn't learn until sometime later that encounters of the sort being proposed had been tried before in Khartoum and had failed. In fact, some of the northern and southern women who came to the first joint tea party at the British residence already knew one another and had failed in previous attempts at "peace dialogue".

Discussion at the first joint meeting was rather formal. The Muslim women laid out their objectives simply: "Let's get to know and understand one another and see

where it takes us. After all, we're all sisters and we all want peace!" The Christians didn't take this at face value: they had been fooled too many times. But they agreed with the Muslims when, a couple hours later, someone asked me, "When can we come again?" By then I, too, could see that something quite stimulating and creative as well as potentially healing and dangerous to male authority might be sparked off by that particular group of women. I was intrigued.

But it wasn't until the second or third gathering that I realised I was not going to be able to slide away from this women's encounter group. Having been introduced, the women showed no signs that they intended to go off together to do whatever it was they wanted to do. In fact, there were three things which they needed from me, although only two which I thought I could provide. First, they needed a secure and neutral meeting place for the work they wanted to do. The British Residence seemed ideal. Then they required a facilitator, a sort of traffic director or neutral personality, who would occasionally step into the fray and calm things down. I could assume this role for although I am a Christian, I am not Sudanese and neither side considered me part of "the problem".

The third ingredient for successful dialogue was a workable method. And here, having no significant background in negotiation or conflict resolution, I was stumped. Thus I fell back on the only method which I know well: "listening therapy" as developed by the Samaritans UK [1]. Two simple rules were agreed: everyone must have an opportunity to tell her story and every story must be listened to with respect even if not believed or not agreed with. Emotional pain, as it quickly became evident, was the common denominator and "listening to loss dialogue" as we called it, became our method.

Bonding the Core Group. We held an all day workshop to plow through some of the initial blame and give expression to the common outrage which needed to be spoken out and underscored, much of it accompanied by questions of "Why me?" and "Why us?" and "What has my group or my gender done to deserve this from your group?" In the initial workshop and others which followed there was venting of pain, exploration of personal emotions, exercises in sensitive listening, affirmation of the viewpoints and feelings of others and identification of common hopes and concerns. I wrote most of the workshop materials with suggestions from the "senior women", as they began to style themselves, on both major sides of the discussion.

By the time their immediate pain had been vented, the women had begun to see common problems and questions. They decided to call themselves The Women's Action Group for Peace and Development and eventually, when the initial group had bonded, chose as their slogan, "The Differences Which Unite Us." As the meetings at the British residence attracted larger and larger groups of women, we moved first from the drawing room into the foyer and eventually out into the garden. I was well aware that but for the maturity of most of the participants we could easily be washed away by the emotions which surged through the group: grief, anger, bitterness, humiliation, jealousy, fear, resentment and desire for revenge. These feelings were based on enormous loss caused by war, poverty, displacement and lack of opportunity as well as by familial, cultural, gender, religious and political oppression. There were times when I felt in desperate need of venting my own emotions. But because I knew taking sides could upset the equation, I usually managed to keep my opinions to myself. [2] Thus began a dialogue unique to Sudan which lasted for approximately two and a half years.

WAG initially met twice monthly in groups of 30 to 50 women and spelled out its objectives as personal healing and group reconciliation by bringing Sudanese women from different ethnic and religious groups into dialogue. We hope, they said, eventually to contribute towards national reconciliation and peace. The senior women discouraged both political and religious discussions as highly dangerous but we all knew that what we were doing was potentially explosive. Eventually it contributed to my own expulsion from Sudan [3].

From the outset there was apprehension that the group would attract negative attention from government security. Partly for this reason men were strictly barred from attendance and there was no formal membership [4]. We are, the women said, committed to non-violent social change and to providing a forum for Sudanese women to speak out their pain, anger and anxiety about loss and disempowerment. We want to increase our understanding of common loss, hopes and concerns over issues such as identity, the breakdown of the educational system and the lower status of women in society. But in those early days, there was first a lot of work to do on a central, crippling issue which welled up even faster than the initial load of pain could be siphoned off.

"Who am I?" the women began to ask. "I know that I am a mother, a wife, a student, a sister, an employee. I know that I am a Dinka or a Nuba or a woman whose family has lived in Omdurman for countless generations. I know that I am a Muslim or a Christian. I know that I am Sudanese. I know that I am a displaced person. I know that I am a widow. But whatever I am, this society seems to force me into a place where I feel I don't fit!" It was apparent from the outset that questions of identity are among the primary barriers which keep women separated from one another. [5]

Loss and Identity. Gradually the women recognised that beneath all that divides Sudanese women there is enormous common loss which can, seen in perspective, serve as a unifying factor. War related losses of family, opportunity, education, and personal freedom are shared by all Sudanese women. Circumstances differ but disempowerment is similar. And much of the loss which afflicts Sudanese women constitutes a massive assault on personal identity by eroding the values which society assigns to women as well as the values which women assign to themselves.

Asked to identify the reasons behind their loss of identity, the women said, "We have suffered loss of family, of health, of friends, of education, of occupation, of language, of dignity and of self respect. War has driven many of us out of our homelands and has taken our relatives whether we are northerners or southerners. National economic decline and social instability have robbed us of educational and economic opportunity. Divorce, which in all our traditions is left to a man or to a woman's family and not to the individual woman, has robbed us of position, of security and of children. Rape has destroyed our respectability and shattered our self confidence. Death has separated us from loved ones. Fire has taken our homes and our possessions. Religion has separated us from our friends and sometimes even from God.

"But worst of all, we have accepted the values which others have put upon us. For example, some women from the Nuba Mountains are so ashamed of their origins that they deny their heritage. Some of us southerners try to act and dress like those other women who rule over us. Some of us who are dark long to have lighter skin instead of appreciating and valuing what we are. Some of us claim to believe in

religions or politics which we really do not believe in or sometimes even understand just in order to gain advantage or security. Some of us bully other women to avoid being bullied ourselves or simply to show that we have the power to do so. Some of us accept that we are stupid or useless because of our tribal origins or lack of education. Many of us are so victimised that we accept the guilt which really belongs to those who victimise us. And some of us are even jealous of those violent people who reject us and yet have power over us. This wishing that we could be other people is really a way of rejecting who we are."

Discussion brought agreement among the women that identity is related to history, religion, civilisation, personal and social attitudes, colonisation and politics. This led into some fascinating questions such as "How is identity used by those in power?" and "Do you really have to wear clothes to be civilised?" One woman cried out that "It is Islam, not culture, which separates us! But which Islam? Not the Islam I believe!" A second woman countered with a play on the idea of racial and moral purity, asking "Who are the Sudanese when their rulers are not pure?"

Although only the facilitator for this courageous dialogue, I began to question some of my own long held assumptions. Early on I had to accept that this "listening therapy" was capable of broadening my understanding of women "not like me" and of opening me to much greater compassion for those who had lost so much more than I had. Meanwhile, I kept very quiet about my missionary grandparents who had carried a "civilising" religious message to China from Mississippi in the opening years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It also became evident early on that issues of identity are highly relevant to conflict resolution. Unless we can feel comfortable with who we are, the women agreed, not only will we continue to suffer personal disempowerment, we will also continue to find it very difficult to accept others as they are. Much energy is wasted trying to make "them" be like us, trying to make ourselves be like "them" and in hating "them" for being against us. War, they decided, is the most blatant example of this waste of energy.

Emphatically they pointed out that Sudanese are not divided mainly along Muslim-Christian or north-south lines, as some outsiders believe. Islam and Christianity as organised religions are both filled with sects and groups that have waged, and still wage, ideological, cultural and theological war on one another as well as on other religions. Such conflicts, women from all regions stressed, have more to do with the very human desire to control other people than with divine religion. Moreover, Sudan is a country of enormous cultural richness and which of the perhaps 500 tribes and sub-groups wishes to lose its language or identity?

Thus, early in the dialogue the WAG women agreed that terminology in popular use would have to be amended. WAG could not be Muslim and Christian women meeting in dialogue because it is not mainly religion which divides Sudanese women from one another. Nor could WAG be northern and southern women in dialogue for the women from the Nuba Mountains, Darfur and the Red Sea Hills quickly protested that they place themselves in neither of these categories. Who are we, they asked with increasing urgency.

Thinking Through Who I Am. "I don't feel like an Arab when I'm outside Sudan," a northern woman confided to the group. "Sometimes Arabs in Lebanon or in Saudi

Arabia refer to us Sudanese as abd because of our colour. Yet I have always thought of myself as an Arab!" There was rueful laughter from other northern women.

"Of course, you don't feel like an Arab," a southerner shot back. "You're an African!" A nerve had been exposed and suddenly everyone wanted to speak. When is an African an Arab and when not? And what is an Arab anyway? Are the Rizeigat, cattle nomads of western Sudan, Arabs? Can't Arabs have dark skin? Why then was Bona Malwal, a Dinka then serving as Minister of Information, laughed at in Saudi Arabia when he arose to speak on behalf of Sudan and began, "We Arabs...?"

A southern woman who had attended the 1995 Women's Conference in Beijing said that activities there were held in tents labelled ARAB, AFRICAN and ASIAN. When she identified herself with the African woman and their activities, representatives of the official Sudanese delegation insisted that she change over to the Arab tent. She was unable to convince them that she could never consider herself an Arab and doubted, moreover, that they thought of her as such. This brought unseemly disarray into the Sudanese delegation.

Hearing this, a northern woman suggested that all WAG members should think of themselves as Sudanese rather than as Arabs or Africans. I am, she said, descended from an Ethiopian grandmother and a Syrian grandfather but this has had no effect on my identity as a Sudanese. A second northern woman supported this position by telling the group about her Dinka grandmother, Jewish grandfather and Dongalawi father – who married her mother "despite the lady's origins". After that it seemed that the time for true confessions had come. A southern woman revealed that she, too, had Jewish ancestors and, even more stigmatising, was married outside her tribe.

Suddenly a very light coloured young woman from Omdurman arose to denounce any suggestion that she had "African blood", declaring hotly "I am an Arab!" When the group questioned this, she announced that the only way to solve the Sudanese identity crisis would be to divide Sudan into two nations. Uproar ensued over this politically sensitive statement with southern women declaring that succession sounded pretty good to them and the south would be glad to oblige if the damned raping and pillaging northern army would just get out of the south. Meanwhile, Nuba women were demanding to know where they were supposed to fit in should the country be split and the facilitator kept flapping her arms and crying for order so that cake could be served. It was probably the finest tea party I had ever attended and by then I had been to quite a few.

But the afternoon wasn't over. After tea the women agreed that "We are all Africans, some Dinka Africans, some Beja Africans, some Arab Africans, but all of us are Africans." Still the young lady from Omdurman persisted: "Can't I call myself an Arab Sudanese like people say they are Italian Americans? I speak of language, culture, religion." The group regarded her with compassion. "Say whatever you like. But perhaps you need to ask yourself why you want to say that? Since you were born in Africa and so were all your ancestors, you really are an African!"

Subsequent meetings were equally lively and intense. The women agreed that there is common cause between women and minority groups and that all those pushed into social marginalisation should explore ways of identifying with one another. In reference to the British colonial era policy of ruling the north and south of Sudan separately, a southern woman lamented that "It was a mistake not to be exposed

earlier to each other, to know what we are. The only southerners who were known were slaves. So now all southerners are called slaves!"

Southern women also commented that their identity seems always impinged upon by government politics: "We have," they said, "no place in the school syllabus and we are often denied jobs because we are not northerners."

"Look at the civil service," someone else said. "It is dominated by northern men and that's where decisions are made about us all. In general no woman, and especially no southern woman, is allowed in other than as an occasional token."

Other women mentioned the fears prevalent in northern Sudan that displaced Sudanese, those crowded into Khartoum and its surrounding desert camps, would never go home even after the war ended. A northern woman suggested that some of the prejudices against displaced persons related to legitimate fears of rising crime, of juvenile delinquency and of the spiralling cost of living which accompanies overcrowding. She admitted, however, that there is also a fear of the moral influence of different cultures, an invasion of the cultural "purity" with which some northern Sudanese seek to identify themselves. This is why, she said, the ruling group refers so often to its "civilisational mission".

"But we all know that the desire to be Arab is based on the idea that non-Arab people need to be civilised," a southerner retorted.

"But this is new!" the northerner insisted. "For the average northern Sudanese to hear 'You are an Arab' used to be an insult. It meant a nomad living in a tent!"

"But how, anyway, do you put moral value on culture?" another woman asked. After that the consideration of cultural purity led quickly into questions of racial purity. When there is "obsession" with cultural purity and with family purity how do people of mixed blood deal with identity issues? And who can claim to have pure blood? Aren't northerners who describe themselves as Arabs actually intermixed through marriage and sexual relations with slave women, with indigenous people who are black Africans?

Amidst another uproar, a northern woman asked whether the southerners had forgotten that their own ancestors had also warred against and enslaved one another. This remark precipitated one of the few occasions on which the facilitator could control her opinions no longer.

"Stop!" I cried. "People are never free until they remove the chains from their own hearts. Is it the slave or the slaver who carries the moral stigma? Why am I not hearing any admiration for ancestors who endured despite such terrible suffering?"

Some of the subsequent pithy comments from women newly arrived at mutual trust and fast moving into friendship are worth recording:

\*"The southerners tend to see themselves as victims. I'm not saying they have not been, but getting stuck on this idea is disempowering and they need to work on overcoming what it had done to them."

\*And in reply, "We southern women are disappointed for northern women when they don't feel Arab enough outside Sudan. That is a big problem for them. But how can I defend my sister when she will not defend herself?"

\*"We are a multi-dialect, multi-culture people. There is an obligation for us who have come to know that we are Sudanese to say so. We should continue to break these prejudices by education."

\*"But education itself is a critical area for assault on our identity! The government has given up on teacher training, basic education is deteriorating in both form and content and girls are dropping out of school in increasing numbers. If the northern Sudanese had bushes as the southerners do, they, too, would run away to the bush!" (Great laughter from all)

\*"According to modern Sudanese history books, Sudanese is separated from Saudi Arabia only because geological plates moved and opened up the Red Sea. If you believe this, we Sudanese are all Arabs even the Zande!"

\*"This attempt to rewrite history is intended to create a religious identity. Now we are divided along religious lines and we end up very many steps behind where we came from. They brainwash everyone! They target children! So people immigrate because they cannot live in a situation in which they are lied to daily."

Reaching Out to More Women. The painful emotions which "listening to loss" dialogue awoke created major difficulties for a few women. Although the senior women attempted to ensure that only women they considered psychologically fit participated in the dialogue, mistakes were sometimes made [6]. Occasionally the facilitator had to take a weeping woman out and befriend her while the discussion swirled forward under the care of the core group. But the common purpose and healing energy which also arose led into desire to share the experience with as many other women as possible. During a moment of grace at one dialogue session, the women looked at one another and said, "We must share this!"

Thus began a spontaneous outreach into the displaced settlements where they would be met by scores of dancing, singing women who yearned to speak out their pain by telling their stories in Dinka, Shilluk, Nuer and the dialects of the Nuba Mountains. It did not matter over much when an interpreter into Arabic or English was not available. What mattered was the attention of the listeners, the affirmation of their tears and the support evident in their effort to understand.

There was also urban outreach. Soon the WAG, in addition to continuing listening to loss dialogue, was holding workshops for a hundred women or more on topics such as women and violence, women and the law, women and war. The WAG Steering Committee, composed of an equal number of northern and southern woman, authorised me to write role plays for their use at Ahfad University on how their identity and dignity were under assault. In "Samia is Shunned by Her Former Classmates," a young northerner is heartbroken when she returns to Khartoum from study abroad and finds that not one of her three southern classmates will see her because their families have been so affected by the war that other family members forbid association with anyone on "the other side." Southern women performed "Cecilia Has a Hard Time on the Bus", which involved a southern woman carrying a

baby who is denied a seat and then insulted by people who speak as though she is not there and will not look at her face.

Some of the other dialogue work was also more daring than I would have thought possible. The senior women asked the group to look at divisive words such as abd, ihad, jallaba, mondokuru, kafr [7] Arab, peace and human rights. The women divided into ethnic groups and wrote statements on "The thing which bothers me most about southerners (or northerners) is...." And "The most important thing which Sudanese women have in common is...." (Lost and pain, faith and hope were favourite answers.) A Dutch "woman's work" professional attended a WAG workshop as an observer and left shaking her head and muttering, "I've never seen anything like it!"

Although I sometimes wondered if I was encouraging the women to go too far, once they started letting the truth out, there was really not much I could have done to stop them. We discussed conflict resolution and the Sudanese women identified themselves as discounted peacemakers, better equipped than men to carry the message of forgiveness and peace to their children and, because they are outside the political and official power structures, more amenable to compromise.

"We are the anchor of society and the last defence against total collapse," they cried. "And yet we are still discounted and marginalised even though older Sudanese women have traditionally been central figures in domestic conflict resolution! Even our traditional functions are under assault. Sudanese women are desperate to save their children. Though men may love their children, very often they have other priorities. Men say they can have other children but we women want these children." And perhaps the strongest indictment of all: "Sudanese women are desperate for peace but men are desperate for power!"

Part of the sense of freedom and even of joy which outreach brought rose from bringing educated and illiterate women into sisterhood. In another workshop at Ahfad University displaced women from Haj Yusuf on the outskirts of Khartoum wrote and performed a role play about the dangers of brewing beer as the only means other than prostitution by which to support their children. This was followed by role play about a displaced woman who was able to find a very low paid job as a servant but was then unjustly accused of theft and beaten when her northern employer was robbed by a neighbour. Northern and western players responded with stories about the plight of a young woman forced into marriage against her will and of Muslim women forbidden to grieve the battlefield deaths of their sons and husbands who, having been declared holy martyrs, were now said to be enjoying the fruits of paradise [8]. All Sudanese women, it was made clear, had suffered loss of power over their own lives.

Once when southern women in dialogue attempted to belittle the loss and trauma of the northerners compared to their own enormous grief and loss, a northern woman quietly replied, "Yes, you have lost much. But when the war is ended and you can return to the south and try to rebuild your lives, we will remain here with a loss which can never be repaired. We have lost parts of our bodies." The reference was to female genital mutilation, ancient practice of the Nile Valley which most southerners do not undergo [9].

"A Home of Our Own". Shortly before WAG moved into its own centre in mid-1998, the WAG Steering Committee did a self assessment. The women were optimistic and

pleased with their achievements which included private circulation of records of some of their meetings. "Packages" we called these sets of documents to avoid reprisal for entry into the forbidden world of publication. One southerner described WAG as holding "a hope that there will be change despite our present depression and marginalisation." Another southerner said, "Things are different after several months of dialogue. There is no longer the anger I felt when we first got together and no longer the great need to speak out. Now we can work together."

One of the original group of northern Muslim women wrote that "We have reached places we would not have dreamed of reaching, leaving behind a ray of light that brightened our hearts. We dialogued with sisters who saw in us a sore wound. Above all, WAG has proved that 'differences do unite us'". She warned, however, that failure by more members to participate in outreach dialogue and the practice of leaving leadership to a few activists constituted a major weakness in the group. Moreover, WAG had failed to fully understand the "language barrier" and the employment problems faced by southern women. Something must be done to help them.

Although her words were intended as a call to move the WAG onto a more active and practical approach to "peace and development," some southerners considered her support for Arabic as a threat to their own linguistic heritage and cultures. Naively, I had supposed we were well past this point. The roots of cultural differences which separated the women, the historical antagonisms and fears, the agony of recent loss, remained much stronger and deeper than I had supposed.

Another northern woman told the group: "WAG has gone a long way. It has created a bridge that connects the displaced women with the 'affluent' women of Sudanese society. The members who had never seen a displaced camp have now come to appreciate the displaced women's problems and are ready to share with them. WAG has passed the stage where its members are pointing accusing fingers at each other. The women have stopped debating and being bitter and the southern women have come to know and appreciate that even the northerners have suffered and have lost their dear ones during this and the past regimes, and they are ready to join hands and work together with them." But this woman, too, sounded a warning which proved tragically prophetic.

"WAG at this point should concretise the base," she said. "We should continue building bridges and creating more dialogue with more women before the facilitator leaves. The differences between the Sudanese people are very sensitive. It is much easier for a foreigner to bring them together and to be a mediator for them than it is for them to come together on their own."

By this time I, too, had become deeply concerned about WAG's future. A number of the original core group of "senior" women had left the country and WAG was experiencing a leadership decline. The move into the women's centre was seen by some as a lapse in attention by the British Embassy and there was a decline in southern attendance, perhaps due in part to departure of some who had initially been attracted by the hope of material advantage. But there was another, long expected, reason for increased hesitation by the southern women. We had suffered only minor harrassments from government security personnel. But now southern men who opposed dialogue between women decided to make their move.

Some months earlier, during a time of savage fighting in the south and deep despair on the part of the women, I had thrown caution to the winds and opened one of our meetings with a request for silent prayer. The look of enormous appreciation on the faces of the Muslim women in particular was a humbling experience for me and led eventually to the idea of a "peace pilgrimage". The event was meant to involve silent prayers for peace by a group of Muslim and Christian women outside three churches and three mosques in Khartoum. Permission would be obtained in advance from both mosque and church authorities, nothing provocative was to occur and women from the Sudan Council of Churches were invited to join in.

Several planning sessions were held and although I purposefully stayed away the reports which came back made it increasingly evident that Christian men were trying to take over the event for political purposes. When the WAG Steering Committee learned that men had inserted themselves into the pilgrimage and would "make speeches" at the various stops despite WAG protest, it was apparent that violence and arrest were likely. WAG withdrew and the peace pilgrimage was never held. From that time even more Christian women stayed away from WAG, apparently on orders.

A Farewell to Dialogue. On the night of 20 August 1998, I had just returned to the British Residence from the official opening of the WAG women's centre when American Cruise missiles hit a pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum North. Explosions across the river were strong enough to rock the British compound and set in train events which quickly resulted in recall of all British diplomats and dependents from Sudan and thus my own departure. Although I would subsequently return alone to Sudan for a month before being expelled in November by Sudanese authorities, after that August evening WAG was on its own without a facilitator.

My main memory of that night is not of the explosions at Shifa but of Nuba women leading about 200 of us in fierce dances accompanied by drums. It was a very hot night and we dancing, sweating women were full of pepsi, joy, love and hope. Was it on that night that I found the courage, at last, to come clean about my own identity? The bombing of the Shifa factory unleashed such traumatic changes, such difficult farewells, that frankly I cannot be entirely certain. All along I had known that many Sudanese women were influenced by their cultures to respect me more fully than they respected one another simply because of my white skin. My racial background is no secret: I have even written about it. Yet what I felt as a half-deception rankled in my heart. Yes, I would like to think that it was on the night of the American bombing of Khartoum that I at last told Izdihar or Sarra the story of Mary Moore my American great grandmother who was "high yellow" or what was referred to in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as "a passer".

On that night certainly, as on so many other occasions, we held hands as the party ended and sang, in both Arabic and English, the hymn of the American civil rights movement: "We shall overcome, we shall overcome. We shall live in peace some day....Deep in my heart I do believe...." Muslims, Christians and traditional believers, northerners, southerners, Nuba, even a Beja and one mixed blood American danced and sang, our hands sticky with sweat and incense and sweets. We were sisters. Skin colour, religion, nationality, culture, politics meant nothing. The sisterhood was our true identity and we would overcome.

As soon as I was out of the country, even more women deserted the WAG, fearing because I was no longer there to protect them – as I never could have done anyway

if the government security men had decided to move against us. Around that time, several more of the senior women also left Sudan. Within a few weeks, outreach dialogue had ceased. But WAG did not fold and after a long painful time emerged into a different type of dialogue, that of service to disadvantaged women.

Today WAG is a registered Sudanese charity which administers a CAFOD-funded HIV/AIDS Awareness Project doing outreach into the displaced settlements. WAG is also one of the few Sudanese community based organisations allowed by the government to work with street girls. But listening to loss dialogue has proved impossible to restart.

What Went Wrong? Perhaps nothing. It is easy for peacemakers to become overly optimistic and naively to assume more progress than has actually been made. Peacemaking takes time and there are no shortcuts. But some methods are better than others and storytelling must always be part of the process of healing the pain, anger and anguish of those who have suffered deeply. Perhaps we need simply to rejoice that true dialogue – which can begin only after mutual trust and points of common identify have been established – did occur. “Listening to loss” dialogue enabled a process of forgiveness to begin as woman after woman recognised that those on “the other side” were actually suffering sisters. No one can fully explain such graced events or tell exactly why they happen and why they cease.

Still, there are some clues as to why WAG’s listening to loss dialogue stopped. Is a neutral facilitator necessary? Clearly the women believed so. It is also possible that as facilitator I did too much and pushed too hard. But departure of many of the senior women would seem to be an even more important ingredient in the cessation of dialogue. The self assessment that too few women were willing to take responsibility for leadership must also be remembered as must the opposition of Christian men who perhaps felt that Christian women were slipping out from under their authority.

All these factors remain relevant for future efforts to reengage women in this type of dialogue. Recent efforts to restart WAG style dialogue found few women willing to participate other than university students. The older, more mature women who set up WAG remain out of the country or have gone on to other activities and are unable or unwilling to reengage. There is also the suggestion that some groups of women now believe that with peace on the horizon there will be no need to learn to live with those who are “other” and that people will now be able to return to living separately. If this is the case, the gift of seeing with the heart and the gift of forgiveness through dialogue will be rejected until intense suffering again brings women to a place of willingness.

Nonetheless, the healing effects of listening to loss dialogue, sharing and listening from the heart, continue in the lives of many women. What I remember about WAG’s first phase is the wonderful openness and honesty of the Sudanese sisters, their sharing of themselves, their tenderness towards and forgiveness of one another. Sudanese women are discounted peacemakers. It is they, not men, who can instigate a work which is critically important to personal, community and national recovery.

Notes

The Samaritans were founded in London in 1953 by an Anglican priest, the Rev. Chad Varah, and are dedicated to suicide prevention through sympathetic, confidential and non-directive "listening therapy".

An American UN employee who facilitated a meeting in my absence incautiously took the southern side on an issue. The southerners were too polite to confront her but when I returned they asked me with considerable indignation to ban the erring woman from further sessions. "We can defend ourselves," they said sternly.

Part of the informal accusation was that I had "too many priests and opposition women as friends", i.e. was involved in human rights issues to an unacceptable degree.

Lack of a formal membership and of a leadership structure, as necessary as it seemed to the women at the time, could probably be cited as yet another reason for WAG's eventual loss of the will to continue listening to loss dialogue.

Dr. Conradin Perner, Swiss anthropologist, writes of attending a meeting in Kenya in November 2000 to which southerners had been invited to discuss the concept of nationhood. He writes: "In Aberdare, the question of identity was put on the table. What is 'a south Sudanese'? I found it amazing and in fact almost amusing to see how the participants struggled to find a positive answer to this intriguing question. 'Am I now a New Sudanese?' someone asked jokingly, but this would not help to specify the identity of such a 'new' person. In fact, the answer to the question was lying blank on the table, obvious to me as a foreigner but apparently hidden from all the others: the identity of each and everybody was to share the identity of the others while still having the identity of being a member of this or that ethnic group, of this or that region, of this or that village, of this or that clan, of being related to this or that family." The House of Nationalities: A Space for Preserving the Unity and the Diversity of the South Sudan. January 2002, p. 9. The seminar, funded by the Embassy of Switzerland in Nairobi, Kenya, was sponsored by the Horn of Africa Centre for Democracy and Development, the New Sudan Council of Churches, the South Sudan Law Society and the Centre for Documentation and Advocacy.

On one occasion only was a Sudanese woman refused admission. Mrs. Sarah al-Mahdi, wife of the former Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi, twice asked me if she could attend the WAG discussions. I put the request to the group which twice turned her down for reasons I did not entirely understand but now see as relating to her political role both at the time and possibly during the time of her husband's government when terrible human rights abuses were committed in Darfur and other parts of the country.

Jihad/holy war; jallaba/reference to robe worn by northern and western Sudanese and term used by southerners to denote a slave merchant; mondukuru/literally "stranger who comes on horseback" to capture people, loot or kill; kafr/Arabic for unbeliever or infidel.

The senior women helped me steer discussion away from the theological mine field. But occasionally a woman rushed forward undeterred. Once when discussing the ruling National Intelligence Front's use of "holy war" and promises of paradise to those who fall in battle against unbelievers, a middle aged Muslim woman sneered, "What's in it for us? We women aren't interested in 15-year-old virgin boys!"

Female genital mutilation (FGM), referred to more commonly as "female circumcision", is an ancient practice of the Nile Valley and not, as commonly supposed, an "Islamic" practice. In other WAG dialogue sessions southern women lamented that, in an effort to appear acceptable and modern, southern Sudanese families do sometimes "circumcise" their daughters. According to the 1990 Sudan Demographic and Health Survey, 89 percent of married women have undergone some form of genital cutting. The SDHS figure did not, however, include southern Sudan where the practice is not widespread. [Reported by the Sudan Organisation

Against Torture (SOAT) press release of 28 August 2002 after a one day suspension of Al Ayam daily newspaper in Khartoum on order of Sudan's National Press Council (NPC). The suspension followed a medical column response to a question asking advice on sexual problems experienced by a couple as a result of her circumcision. The NPC stated that such explicit sexual references are a "slur on public decency". The SOAT countered that the Government of Sudan is unwilling "to allow open discussion of personal or medical matters, especially on the issue of female circumcision" even though it is officially opposed to the practice, which nonetheless remains clandestinely and broadly practiced].