

Peace through meeting

Heidi Watts on a book telling the often untold stories of journeys to peace and reconciliation in a time of war without end



Unarmed Heroes: the courage to go beyond violence,
Peace Direct, (ed.), Clearview, England, 2004

'The feeling of awe at the raw courage of people who refuse to be cowed by brutality or oppression never left me.'
Scilla Elworthy, p155

I, too, have always marveled at 'raw courage', and particularly the courage which is required to speak 'truth to power', as the Quakers say, to stand up for unpopular, or minority views in the face of intimidation, humiliation and personal danger. I think of those often unsung heroes who have said, in service to human rights and dignity, 'we shall not be moved.' *Unarmed Heroes* is a collection of simply told stories from men and women of exceptional integrity who are committed to non-violence and who have refused to move, or stand aside, or to look the other way when they see conflict, injustice and human suffering. The sixteen brief personal stories in this book come from the front line of non-violent resistance to oppression or injustice in our contemporary world. Men and women in Northern Ireland, Palestine, Israel, India, the Congo, Pakistan, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Iraq and the United States describe their work for peace and conflict resolution briefly, candidly and with admirable humility.

In Northern Ireland one woman develops connections with the man responsible for her father's death, and another describes what it has meant for him to understand his actions from the point of view of the other. In the United States, two different people who have lost close relatives in the bombing of the twin towers on September 11 describe their efforts to work for peace and understanding against the current drive for retaliation and revenge. In India, one woman writes about her work mediating conflict between warring tribal groups. In the Congo, a man blinded by the attack on the American embassy in 1998 creates a network for other victims of violence. A man who lost his daughter in the Oklahoma bombing, works to abolish the death penalty for his daughter's murderer and for all others. These are heroic stories from little-known people – not Nelson Mandela, not Gandhi, not Thich Nhat Hanh, but ordinary people like you and me who have been able, in small ways and local situations, to draw out of themselves the best of what a human being can be. Awe-inspiring is the right word for the quiet courage reflected in these simple unassuming stories.

The stories are followed by four essays on the peaceful resolution of conflict from members of Peace Direct, the organisation which has sponsored this important little book. The essays combine an analysis of what the stories tell us with guidelines for becoming an activist for peace. The emotions which may be both cause and effect from the work, such as anger, fear and a sense of powerlessness, are described and discussed, as are the skills required to be an activist: among them the ability to persevere, learn from mistakes, develop skills and hunt for common ground.

In the final section of the book we are given an extensive list of resources for peace and conflict resolution in the U.K., another list for the world, a short annotated bibliography of recommended reading, and a list of web-based resources. *Unarmed Heroes* is both a practical guide and an inspiration for all of us who want to be part of building a more peaceful world.



Illustrations Claire Meredith