

Make me an instrument of peace

*Katie O'Connor interviews Australian peace activist,
Donna Mulhearn. Donna's daily prayer is the prayer of
St Francis: it has led her into the world's most tragic places*

In recent times I have become more and more aware of Jesus' teaching on non-violence and peacemaking. During the lead up to the Iraq war I was confronted

by this teaching. My own government was about to go to war with a country it had no conflict with. My daily prayer has been – with St Francis – that God would make me an instrument of peace. The opportunity to live this prayer came to me when I heard the call from a former US marine for human shields to go to Iraq.

So I went and spent a month in Iraq before the war started, coming to appreciate the overwhelming warmth and hospitality of the people. We were accepted into their homes and families. Iraq I found to be a sophisticated and technologically advanced society, a very attractive place totally different from the media stereotype.

Then the war started. It was something I had never before experienced – and, please God, our countries will never experience it. The chaos and the noise: bombing, anti-aircraft fire, planes and helicopters. All day, every day. We were taken to civilian areas which had been bombed, where buildings had been destroyed by missiles. We saw toys and tennis racquets and ordinary household things scattered by bomb blast.



The people said to us: “You have come here to be with us despite what your governments are doing.” There was no resentment. My own family has stood by me: otherwise I might have struggled.

I went back to Baghdad a second time in December 2003 and stayed for six months. I returned for a third time in November 2004 just for a month. During the second tour I went to work with homeless children. We opened a shelter with funds raised in our home countries. We worked with about 20 boys aged 9-19, trying to get them away from criminal activity and back to normal living.

Most Iraqi children have been traumatised by the events of war and display disturbing symptoms. So we set up a centre where such children could receive counselling. We also assisted poor families in refugee camps. It was six months' hard work at the grass roots; no administration, no red tape, and we got a lot done.

Fallujah

Towards the end of the six months, we

were invited to Fallujah which was then under attack. Some doctors asked us; they were trying to provide food and medicine for people in the city. So they hoped the Coalition forces would not shoot

at the ambulances, since we were Americans or Australians on board.

We went into the city by back roads to deliver aid. But we still got shot at by American soldiers. They would not let us deliver the aid. It was my worst experience. Women and children who had been shot were being brought into the clinics. The media were shut out so never reported the atrocities that were taking place.

On the way out we were caught in crossfire and found ourselves surrounded by insurgents, who captured us. At first they treated us with suspicion, thinking we were spies. The men were handcuffed; the women were not touched. It was very frightening. We thought we might get used as hostages. Since I was Australian I received a lot of attention during the questioning. They said: “Why do you Australians want to harm us? Are you not our friends?” They appeared to be personally offended by the fact that Australia had chosen to take a stance against them.

Eventually we were able to prove to them that we really were what we said

we were, so the next day they let us go. But they kept repeating: “We are Muslims. We won’t hurt you.” I believed them and that took away my fear.

I am convinced that the root problem in Iraq is the presence of a foreign occupying force. Remove that presence and Iraq will be on its way to a better future. People keep saying to me: “But what if... What if there’s civil war?” Such opinions come from the media. Iraq is perfectly capable of governing itself. The Iraqi people live together and never refer to themselves as Shiite or Sunni. They are neighbours even if they come from different traditions.

The root cause of violence is the presence of the coalition forces. Remove those forces, and the incidents will reduce dramatically. Even the insurgent troops are saying to the

funded by taxpayers – and supported by our governments.

Withdrawing from the Gaza strip is certainly a step in the right direction: the settlements were illegal in the first place. But it isn’t enough. Gaza does not control its borders or its air space; the people are not free to move in and out. That is not freedom. In the meantime more settlements are being built on the West Bank – also against international law and UN directives. An apartheid ‘wall’ is being built right through the Holy Land. To build it, agricultural land is being stolen and houses knocked down. This is not peace. It is for one side only. Peace without justice is never peace.

The checkpoints have to be dismantled. The Wall has to be torn down. Extremist settler activity has to cease. There is constant harassment of Palestinian people in their towns and homes. It has to stop.

Going to Texas

Camp Casey started with one grieving mother’s stand. Cindy Sheehan, whose son Casey was killed in Iraq, is seeking answers from President Bush. Bush states that her son died in a noble cause. She wants to ask

Bush, face to face, ‘what is that noble cause?’

Cindy went to Crawford, Texas, where the President has his ranch. She is waiting at his gate, and has been joined there by hundreds of others from across America. When I heard about what she was doing I knew I had to be there too. I found a huge cross-section of US society, young and old, Democrat and Republican, from every cultural background. What they are saying is: “Enough is enough. We are not leaving until we get an answer.”

This was such good news for me. My Prime Minister is President Bush’s ‘deputy sheriff’ – that is what Bush calls him! I say to my American friends: “We are with you and support you.” I was able to carry hundreds of messages of support to Cindy from Australians. I feel history was being made there. It is the turning point.

Cindy is not a politician. She is a grieving mother, and lots of Americans agree with her. They have planted white crosses along a road, one for each American killed in Iraq. They stretch right down the road. I thought: there isn’t a road long enough to count all the Iraqi deaths. I felt within me a coming together of the grief of American families and of Iraqi families. The grief caused by this terrible war is universal. No one is untouched. ■



government: “Give us a timetable when the occupying forces are due to withdraw – and we will cease our insurgent activities.” The Iraqis want to be left to themselves.

Palestine

Having seen how the media misrepresented the situation in Iraq, I suspected the same might be true in Palestine. I wanted to see for myself. So I went and stayed there four months. Palestine is worse than Iraq. Iraq is messy. No one is too sure where the violence is coming from. But in Palestine the violence is deliberate and it is targeted. It is state-sanctioned terror against a civilian population,

My apologia

I was brought up a Catholic. As a teenager I became an Evangelical fundamentalist, and stayed there 15 years. After suffering a significant loss in my life I found I needed a more contemplative stance rather than the somewhat superficial, black and white attitude of fundamentalists.

I was drawn to the Christian mystics, and began to seek God in stillness and silence. I had spent years searching for experiences of God across the five continents:

but all the time the answer lay within me. I was in this Benedictine monastery and had a moment of transformation.

The Christian teaching on non-violence and the Sermon on the Mount have impelled me. My call now is to do more than simply hold a placard at a demonstration. I have to connect daily with God within me to enable me to learn to love God and my neighbour. Doing that is a full-time job!