

Radio Devon: 'Pause for Thought' - on Sunday 3 October 2010

The Inner Light

I used to be a Church of England agnostic. I knew what I should believe, but somehow it didn't fit me. Over the years I found myself saying less and less of the creed.

Eventually I could only say - and mean - the first four words: "I believe in God". I knew there was *something* but I couldn't take all the wrapping. It wasn't until 1960 that I began to find my way, a way that has now led me from the Navy to the Religious Society of Friends - the Quakers.

In the Navy I learnt what mutual trust can achieve when we face a disaster, and how we can make justice palatable and how we can find true equality, even from different roots. Perhaps most important of all, I learnt how we can find our way through rules so that our actions show compassion and understanding. This is also the Quaker way. We don't rely on statements in a book, even the Bible, unless we can imagine Jesus saying them.

I am so glad that I found my way to the Quakers. It may not be the way for all, but for those of us who find rules difficult and instead try and find where the Spirit - or the Inner Light as Quakers say - is trying to lead us, there is freedom and support and companionship with all creeds, with all races and indeed with all men and women.

Richard Hilken, Exeter

Radio Devon: 'Pause for Thought' - on Monday 4 October 2010

Learning

I am a Quaker, a member of the Religious Society of Friends. If you have heard of us at all, you probably know that we are a pacifist church. It may then surprise you to learn that I used to be in the Royal Navy. Their training rapidly made it clear to me that world wars would inevitably be a disaster for this country. We were too vulnerable to nuclear attack and also to modern submarines, which would rapidly starve us out, even if we were not bombed first. The Suez invasion in 1956 showed that we could never again fight a "brush-fire" war unless the Americans supported us. That left "aid to civil power" as the single remaining major function for the Navy. That is not a minor service, there are many disasters in the world where a body of trained and disciplined men can do wonders.

Humanity needs a role other than war, something on which, when we get older we can look back with pride. I hope we in Britain can find such a role that makes use of our tradition of fair play and our sympathy for the under-dog. I hope we overcome racism and fanaticism. Quakers have found that it is possible to have a religious belief that does not depend on words or history. Religion is a jewel, even if we all look at a different facet, but only as long as we do not demand that everyone shares our view.

Richard Hilken, Exeter

Radio Devon: 'Pause for Thought' - on Tuesday 5 October 2010

1953 Earthquake Relief

In 1953 I took part in what the Navy calls, 'aid to civil power'. This was the frightful 1953 earthquake on the Ionian islands in the Adriatic (see the book 'Captain Corelli's Mandolin'). Our ship, HMS Gambia, was on her way back to Malta after having spent six weeks at the mouth of the Suez Canal making sure that all British ships knew what to do if there was trouble between the Israelis and the Egyptians. Suddenly, the ship went up to full speed and turned sharply north.

When we arrived at Zakynthos at crack of dawn there was hardly a house standing in a town of over 1,000 people. People needed to be rescued from the ruins, the dead needed to be buried and everywhere there were fires to be fought. We set up a team to fight fires, another to prop up buildings and check if anyone was still alive, a burial team, with the chaplain to give last rites. Our galley was baking bread non-stop and our cutters shuttled constantly from ship to shore with clean water to drink. We erected a canvas marquee for the wounded since the island's hospital had collapsed. We worked flat out for four days until organised relief arrived.

We have seen similar natural disasters in Haiti and Pakistan. I wonder if today's navies could do as much as we did?

Richard Hilken, Exeter

Radio Devon: 'Pause for Thought' - on Wednesday 6 October 2010

Practical Help

I was in HMS Gambia, the first ship to reach the Ionian island Zakynthos after their 1953 earthquake. In Zante, a town of about 1,000 people, there was hardly a house left standing and no light or water or civic services.

We all were allocated to different teams, I was put in charge of our (tented) hospital guard party, to make sure that the medicines and food supplies were not looted. There were no police on the island, since after the first shocks the police, with their guns, had commandeered all the boats and had taken themselves and their families to the mainland.

I used to walk around my sentries (we were armed only with pickaxe handles!) to see that they were OK and to give them a bit of company in the pitch dark night. We had a campfire, and those off-watch slept round it. We were worried about being rolled into the fire by the frequent aftershocks, so I got them to dig shallow trenches to sleep in, about 6" deep - pointing at the fire so the aftershocks would not roll us into it.

Looking back on those four days I feel I was not a very good leader (in spite of my good idea with the trenches), but I now realise that in an emergency it is sometimes more important to take a decision than to be perfect. Dithering, especially in a disaster situation, can be deadly.

Richard Hilken, Exeter

Radio Devon: 'Pause for Thought' - on Thursday 7 October 2010

Trust

I would like to look at one of the special lessons which I learnt as a submariner, and that was the transforming effect of trust. My experience was in the 1950s so I am speaking of the lessons I learnt in the submarines of the day.

In the services, discipline is central, and in the Navy it is generally practiced in a way that does not turn you into an automaton. In the Submarine Service however it is more a question of mutual trust than of discipline, since there are so many ways in which any of us could cause an accident simply by forgetting something and then not admitting it when you remember. I remember my captain saying that if the lower ranks distrusted anyone, even an officer, the coxwain would tell him privately, and that man would be off the boat at the first opportunity.

As a midshipman on a cruiser, where discipline was firm and lines were toed, I saw a case where a seaman was told to throw a rope to a boat coming alongside and he tried to object because he knew it was not made fast at the other end. He was told to be silent and throw - and as a result the rope was lost and the boat had to come round again. Having seen rigid discipline - and its mirror image, I know which I prefer – Trust.

Richard Hilken, Exeter

Radio Devon: 'Pause for Thought' - on Friday 8 October 2010

Generosity

I nearly ruined my naval career as a midshipman by not falling into the mould expected by my captain and commander. I know I was classed as one of three problem officers on our ship. I was behaving with the sort of arrogance that often comes with the final years at a boarding school. The captain and commander decided that regular beatings were the way to teach me my place, and no doubt if they had not left the ship half way through my midshipman's time, I would have been pushed out.

What saved me were the actions of the new captain, who instead of punishment, decided to try support and advice (which I sorely needed). In fact I think it not too much to say that he inspired me to take my career more seriously, and to find out the things I could do well and the ones that needed improvement. It worked a dream. I rediscovered my enthusiasm, and having passed out with good marks I was free to do my "small ships" time in a submarine. This was ideal for me, and there also I had a CO who backed me and recommended me for the Submarine Service.

Both these two were risking something to give me their backing. I am sorry that I did not recognise their generosity until long after I had left the Navy. I would like to say at last how grateful I am to them both. I wonder if there is someone in your life to whom you should have said "Thank you".

Richard Hilken, Exeter

Cooperation

As Royal Navy cadets we trained initially with cadets from the Indian, Pakistani and Srilankan Navies. Since English was not their first language in most cases, they tended to treat specified wording rather slavishly. Sometimes friendship overtook the rules, but not, alas, in this case.

The Navy has strict guidelines about giving orders in a way that can be understood, even in a gale. You must, for example, not give an order "Full Ahead Both" since at sea that could be mistaken for "Full Ahead Port" (meaning the left engine only); and the rule was that incorrectly phrased orders should not be obeyed. One day when a motor boat was being brought alongside our gangway in HMS Devonshire, the cox'n said to the engineer: "Slow Ahead Both" - nothing happened. "Stop Both - Full astern Both" **CRASH!** The cox'n said, "Why didn't you stop when I told you"? The engineer replied, "You did not say "Together".

At the damage enquiry, the commonwealth engineer complained that a correct order had not been given. The decision of the commander was that the English cox'n should have his leave stopped for a month for giving the wrong order, and the commonwealth engineer was put in charge of repairing the boat (not as a punishment of course, but coincidentally it meant no leave for a month). Those of us not involved felt justice had been done, though sympathy and friendly communication would have saved them both.

Richard Hilken, Exeter