

Remembering Forward:  
The Visionary Practical Scholarship of Adam Curle  
John Paul Lederach  
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*Introduction*

This 40<sup>th</sup> year celebration provides a wonderful opportunity to reflect back and look forward. As I was thinking of this plenary session I reflected on key challenges facing our wider field of scholarship and practice. Three came to mind, sparked in part by noting the topics of discussion in this event and the discourse and narratives we seem to debate.

- *Liberal Peace* -- the challenge of the deficiencies of imperial, external mandates that tend to devalue, ignore and invisibilize the centrality of embedded and local capacity, narrative and agency. A lack of vertical and global/local integration remains one of our most significant weaknesses.
- *Ineffective timeframes of response and commitment* -- driven in large part by the very nature of the “international community’s” form of agency, the imagination about time is, paradoxically, *both too short and too slow*: Slow to respond to emerging crises though early warning is clear and short-term in investment expecting political and social change in the course of “projects”. Templates, techniques, and transitions provide the guiding metaphors from within this time orientation and dominate over notions of transformation, relational engagement, and sustained dialogue and social change.
- *Political Realism* -- call it what you will the best we can hope for is some form of containment by way of political accommodation that replaces a notion of whole body politics inclusive of deeper, though deemed unrealistic processes that link as interdependent the imaginations about justice and social healing.

The results of these we could describe as:

- Disembodied politics
- Artless and heartless social change processes (no war, no peace, no justice and mercy only for the merciless)
- And less we judge outwardly we should not forget that we in the academe contribute significantly -- we are ever more proficient in our scholarly rigor on ever less budget moving us toward filling the ever narrowing demands for the professional technocracy needed to carry forward the less than satisfactory practice of peace.

I apologize for such dose of pessimism so early in the morning, though perhaps as I argued in one book there is a gift dancing on her stage, the gift of getting ourselves squared with the challenges we actually face.

Into these challenges I would like to cast an eye back and forward at the same time, *remembering forward* as I titled this plenary, to the first Professor of Peace Studies here at Bradford, Adam Curle.

Adam was a beacon of orientation in my early career both as a practitioner and a scholar. I read Adam before I read Galtung. I read Adam well before I read *Getting to Yes*. I ended up seeking out Quakers in Boulder, CO for my Phd studies (Bouldings, Wehr) though maybe I should have come to Bradford. Prior to coming into teaching at a university my work in peacebuilding and mediation was informed by Adam. I had numerous and what I considered significant spaces of conversation with him about dilemmas I was facing in mediation processes. He served as a mentor and wise practitioner. He rarely answered any of my questions. Yet I always left our encounters with greater clarity and sense of encouragement.

Following his death in 2006 I began a process of systematically trying to collect all his major writings, and with recent help of the archives here in Bradford I think I may be close. During a recent sabbatical year I read back through this body of work, though I have not had time to develop my reflections on this in writing. I recognized in a new way how much he provided the shoulders of my own work and scholarship. I would propose that Adam remains one of the most important influences relevant to many of our contemporary debates but that some of his most visionary contributions, ones with potential corrective qualities, remain at the periphery of how mainstream peacebuilding has evolved and the literatures held as central. In what remains of my thirty minutes I would like to share five observations I noticed in my re-reading of Adam's work that may serve as a way to provoke our reflection about the nature of the challenges I just noted. This will suffer from a whirlwind like quality that perhaps establishes core categories with a few illustrations but will not fully unpack or explore the wider implications.

I start with two observations related to his practice as an intermediary, then two related to his scholarship, and a final one pertaining to the overall impression about the quality of character.

### *Lost Art of Conciliation*

I start with what I would call the lost art of conciliation. Adam had a particular notion about his work as an intermediary. At times in his writing he provided specific advice about technique and frameworks. But underpinning his view was the deep core belief that conciliation developed around the relational requirement and practice of sustained listening oriented toward preparing people to overcome the psychological and deeply human challenge of encountering the enemy that required one feel safe enough to encounter oneself -- our own fears, internal

barriers and cherished biases. Adam called this conciliation – in *Mystic and Militants* he described it this way. In conciliation “hostile individuals are brought to the point where they perceive each other with less unreasonable fear and hostility so that they can, with some hope of success, begin the process of bargaining (negotiation) which leads to a settlement of the dispute and resolution of the conflict”. Of note and without shortcuts, conciliation must work slowly, quietly and with long-term commitment.

### *Befriending*

Conciliation goes in hand with a concept I have only rarely seen cited in mediation literature yet has in my own practice captured the core of what I do -- it is the radical notion of diplomacy as friendship. Adam phrased it as an active verb: To befriend. Adam literally understood befriending as the quality of relationship characterized by elements of care, concern, honesty and commitment and never taken up for purposes of instrumental engagement to achieve ulterior purposes, even if those are noble. We can imagine why the term did not stick as the field grew professionally aiming ever more toward the technical and efficient definitions of roles, where at worst the approach was dominated by narrow views of neutrality and at best impartiality defined as equi-distance from each side. At the core of Adam’s engagement was not technique but rather his vocational impulse of seeking mutual humanity leading to what I would today refer to as a compassionate presence.

### *Reflective Practice*

Among the most dominant observations I had about Adam’s scholarship when reading one book after the other was this: *He embodied an approach of reflective practice*. Adam committed to a life of learning by doing. He reflected systematically on what had been experienced in the real world, whether at the highest level of negotiations with Generals and Presidents or at the level of local communities under siege in Bosnia. Among the elements we have not evolved well in the world of the academe is how to hold the space for and value the practitioner-scholar. Our bifurcation of value pushes the practitioner to separate out into the world of professional engagement but with too little time or use for deep reflection. And it pushes the scholar to separate from the true messiness of the world they seek to study. Adam chose to live in both worlds, an example that informed my own vocation. If we are to take more seriously the challenges mentioned a few moments ago we in the academe would need a radical reconsideration of how we value embodied learning, a gap ill addressed in the very place where our future generations are formed.

### *Inner and Outer Worlds*

I think it fair to say that Adam was an intrepid traveler. Along with small teams their peacebuilding adventures could today make for interesting traveling shows –

the forerunners of second track diplomacy living unprotected in the wilds of open, violent war zones, moving between enemies at considerable risk. What is less explored in Adam's work academically was the equally intrepid travel into the inner world of peacebuilding, seeking to find balance, wholeness, stillness, mindfulness and the spirituality of engaged nonviolence. We don't have many classes in our curriculum that attend to the development of compassion, health and wholeness of personhood. And as such, to be very honest, we have a lot of burnout and professional apathy, signs that our preparation provides for filled heads and lonely souls. Adam had a theory about this for himself. In an intriguing essay titled *Peace and Love The Violin and Oboe* (which began with the Bach's *Concerto in D Minor* for the two instruments thus perhaps representing one of the first times that peace studies bridged into the arts) he spoke these words: "As I have tried, over the past years, to grapple with the problems of violence and injustice, I have realized increasingly, how little I can do as I am. Without an inner evolution I cannot act wisely." Adam's life pedagogy suggested the need to live in the liminal space that navigates between the inner and outer world, a space most politicians, activists, practitioners and scholars fear more than death itself.

### *The humility of learning*

A final observation emerging from the full reading of Adam's work: Across a lifetime he remained open to learning. He embodied the humility of a true scientist a quality that at the same time *cultivates* the deep listener. This embodiment holds lightly the need to defend Truth, whether in the form of academic battles over theories or whether in the form of ultimate religious belief. His early work focused on educational models and a major inductive treatise on a theory of peace yet his last book was simply titled *The Fragile Voice of Love*. If we look carefully at the deeper attitudinal forces that form the structural patterns underpinning the challenges mentioned early on in this talk we would find what might best be described as arrogance: The belief that one's knowledge, approach and theory is superior, a belief that in turn blinds the capacity to be with and alongside others in a common endeavor for the wider good. The antidote emerges only in the form of radical humility – a way of being with rather than over others. This may be why we have disembodied politics and an academe that too often succumbs to the winds of arrogance and the trails of funding.

I will leave that as the last provocation.