

LIVING NON VIOLENTLY

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I'm a Protestant from the south of Ireland, married to a Catholic also from the south of Ireland, but we've lived in Belfast since 1975. I went to boarding school in the Border region of Northern Ireland and that was an interesting experience because it was a good introduction to the Protestant community in the North.



In school there was a British army cadet force which I was a member of for a couple of years. We were watching a British army training film on hand to hand combat. One side were the British and one side were the Russians, one side were doing all the winning and one side were doing all the dying, but there was no blood and guts. I think it was something about that lack of balance and surreal nature that made me think this is ridiculous. I think part of my reaction could have been because of Christian teaching, in terms of "loving your enemy," and I suppose coming from the south I was a bit removed from it – I didn't identify with British institutions like the Army and so I looked at it maybe in a different way.

So I handed back my uniform and said "that's it, no". The school very much saw the cadet force as part of the institution and when I started speaking out against that kind of approach at one stage the Principal told me to "shut up or get out" – that was a testing experience for a 16 year old to have. It was 1969 and that was the start of my involvement in nonviolence and peace activities.



The Troubles in Northern Ireland were a challenge for anyone believing in nonviolence. At times it seemed that all sides (republicans, loyalists, state, and those in alliance with these three) each supported whatever violence they could get away with. After involvement with 'Dawn' peace magazine from 1974 and Bishopscourt Peace

Camp from 1983-6, an Irish Network for Nonviolent Action Training and Education (INNATE) was born in 1987 which I became coordinator of in a voluntary capacity. The hope was to provide a support mechanism for those involved and committed to nonviolence and nonviolence training. One fairly early and important piece of work which we did was in pioneering monitoring/observing work in Northern Ireland which, along with other developments, has played an important role in preventing escalation in contentious situations and continues to be used, more on a local and interface level.

I would like to think that in the four decades since I have tried to practise nonviolence my beliefs have deepened, expanded, and matured; they have certainly developed but I am aware that I do not have all the answers, and I haven't even come across all the questions. But I have certainly become aware of the range and depth of nonviolence and aware of many or at least some of the possibilities. My work in nonviolence training is about helping others to explore these possibilities. My work with INNATE in general is about helping the peace and reconciliation sector, and allied sectors, to develop, and become a force for transformation in Ireland and more widely.

We all have possibilities to act nonviolently, even in the most difficult circumstances; the task is to persuade people they have choices, explore the nonviolent choices that exist, and prepare people for them. That, and the awareness of it, did not exist when the Troubles developed.

